



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



TUESDAY — 1 FEB 2022

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Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	02/01 Amnesty: Israel enforcing apartheid
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/amnesty-accuses-israel-enforcing-apartheid-palestinians-2022-02-01/
GIST	<p>JERUSALEM, Feb 1 (Reuters) - Amnesty International accused Israel on Tuesday of subjecting Palestinians to a system of apartheid founded on policies of "segregation, dispossession and exclusion" that it said amounted to crimes against humanity.</p> <p>The London-based rights group said its findings were based on research and legal analysis in a 211-page report into Israeli seizure of Palestinian land and property, unlawful killings, forcible transfer of people and denial of citizenship.</p> <p>Israel said the report, the second by an international rights group in less than a year to accuse it of pursuing a policy of apartheid, "consolidates and recycles lies" from hate groups and was designed to "pour fuel onto the fire of antisemitism".</p> <p>It accused Amnesty UK of using "double standards and demonization in order to delegitimize Israel".</p> <p>Palestinians praised the report.</p> <p>"The United Nations Security Council and the General Assembly are obliged to heed the compelling evidence presented by Amnesty and other leading human rights organizations and hold Israel accountable for its crimes against the Palestinian people, including through sanctions," the Palestinian foreign ministry said in a statement.</p> <p>Amnesty said Israel was enforcing a system of oppression and domination against Palestinians "wherever it has control over their rights", including Arab citizens of Israel, Palestinians in Israeli-occupied territory and refugees living abroad.</p> <p>The measures included restrictions on Palestinian movement in territory occupied in the 1967 Middle East war, underinvestment in Palestinian communities in Israel, and preventing the return of Palestinian refugees.</p> <p>Alongside forcible transfers, torture and unlawful killings, which Amnesty said were intended to maintain a system of "oppression and domination", they constitute "the crime against humanity of apartheid".</p> <p>Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said: "Israel is not perfect, but it is a democracy committed to international law and open to scrutiny" with a free press and a strong Supreme Court.</p> <p>Israel has cited security concerns in imposing travel restrictions on Palestinians, whose uprising in the early 2000s included suicide bombings in Israeli cities.</p> <p>"SHOCK AND DISTURB"</p> <p>Palestinians seek a state of their own in the West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Gaza, a coastal strip that Israel also seized in the 1967 war but left in 2005, is run by Hamas, considered by the West to be a terrorist group.</p> <p>The last round of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks collapsed in 2014.</p> <p>"Our conclusions may shock and disturb - and they should," Amnesty Secretary General Agnes Callamard said at a news conference in Jerusalem.</p> <p>"Some within the government of Israel may seek to deflect from them by falsely accusing Amnesty of attempting to destabilize Israel or being antisemitic, or unfairly singling out Israel," Callamard said, adding that such criticism was "baseless."</p>

	<p>The Jewish Federations of North America denounced the report it described as "irresponsibly distorts international law, and advances hateful and disparaging rhetoric associated with age-old antisemitic tropes, while ignoring or whitewashing violence, terror and incitement committed by Palestinians."</p> <p>The Central Council of Jews in Germany echoed those remarks and called on Amnesty International's German section to distance itself from the report, which it called antisemitic.</p> <p>Amnesty said the U.N. Security Council should impose an arms embargo on Israel for killing scores of civilians during weekly protests on the border with Gaza in 2018-19. Israel has said those protests included attempts by Palestinian militants to breach its border fence.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/01 Olympic Covid cases in 'expected range'
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/beijing-olympics-says-24-new-covid-cases-detected-among-games-related-personnel-2022-02-01/
GIST	<p>BEIJING, Feb 1 (Reuters) - The COVID-19 situation at the Beijing Winter Olympics is within the "expected controllable range" despite increasing positive cases being detected, a senior official at China's Olympics Pandemic Prevention and Control Office said on Tuesday.</p> <p>The Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics Organising Committee has reported 200 COVID cases since Jan. 23 among airport arrivals and those in the Games "closed loop" bubble that separates all event personnel, including athletes, from the public.</p> <p>"As more people are entering China the imported COVID-19 cases are increasing," Huang Chun, deputy director general of the committee's Pandemic Prevention and Control Office, told a news briefing.</p> <p>Huang said rising cases were also a result of more effective and accurate COVID detection techniques by customs.</p> <p>Organisers reported 24 new COVID cases among Games-related personnel on Jan. 31, of which 16 were athletes.</p> <p>Many athletes have been ruled out of the Feb. 4-20 Games after testing positive on arrival at the airport while others who are asymptomatic are isolating. read more</p> <p>Three of the 414 members of the Canadian delegation in Beijing were impacted by China's COVID-19 protocols over their ability to fulfill their roles at Games, the Canadian Olympic Committee said in a statement on Tuesday.</p> <p>"Part of our strategy was to arrive early to allow time for confirmation testing and, if necessary, the Medical Expert Panel process to unfold," it said.</p> <p>One of the positive cases is an athlete, although the Canadian committee did not disclose the name for privacy reasons.</p> <p>"Getting to the Olympics is never easy and this time, as a new mom, it has been the most challenging," Elana Meyers Taylor, a three-times Olympic medalist in bobsled, wrote on social media from her isolation hotel.</p> <p>China credits the strict COVID control measures, including frequent nucleic acid testings, for helping prevent clustered cases inside the closed loop.</p> <p>"(The COVID-19 situation) is generally within our expected controllable range. So the Games participants, including athletes, and Chinese public do not have to worry," said Huang.</p>

	He said Olympics organisers were not considering any major changes to COVID control policies at the Games.
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HEADLINE	01/31 Pentagon: more troops to eastern Europe?
SOURCE	https://www.newsmax.com/newsfront/troops-ukraine/2022/01/31/id/1054871/
GIST	<p>The Pentagon said on Monday it is in active discussions with Eastern European allies about possible U.S. troop deployments to NATO's eastern flank, as Washington moves to reassure jittery NATO allies in the face of a Russian military buildup near Ukraine.</p> <p>Any decisions on new troop movements would be separate from the some 8,500 forces in the United States who were put on alert last week to potentially bolster a NATO rapid response force, the Pentagon said, adding context to President Joe Biden's comments on Friday about potential near-term deployments to Eastern Europe.</p> <p>Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said the troops that Biden was referring on Friday to could potentially be redeployed from within Europe.</p> <p>"We're going through the rigorous work of providing options for the commander in chief should he decide to do that ... in close consultation with the actual allies themselves," Kirby said.</p> <p>Separately, the U.S. military last week put about 8,500 troops inside the United States on alert to be ready to deploy to Europe, largely to fill the ranks of a NATO rapid response force should the alliance call them up for duty.</p> <p>Russia denies planning an invasion. But, having engineered the ongoing crisis by surrounding Ukraine with forces from the north, east and south, Moscow is now citing the Western response as evidence to support its narrative that Russia is the target, not the instigator, of aggression.</p> <p>Russia, which seized Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and backs pro-Russian rebels fighting government forces in eastern Ukraine, is demanding sweeping security guarantees including a promise NATO never admit Ukraine.</p> <p>Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov is expected to speak by phone with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday, a State Department spokesperson said.</p> <p>Biden stressed diplomatic efforts aimed at averting a conflict.</p> <p>"We continue to engage in nonstop diplomacy and to de-escalate tensions," Biden told reporters in the Oval Office.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Recall: Tesla cars, SUVs
SOURCE	https://www.newsmax.com/finance/streettalk/tesla-full-self-driving-software-recall/2022/02/01/id/1054906/
GIST	<p>Tesla is recalling nearly 54,000 cars and SUVs because their "Full Self-Driving" software lets them roll through stop signs without coming to a complete halt.</p> <p>Documents posted Tuesday by U.S. safety regulators say that Tesla will disable the feature with an over-the-Internet software update. The "rolling stop" feature allows vehicles to go through intersections with all-way stop signs at up to 5.6 miles per hour.</p> <p>Tesla agreed to the recall after two meetings with officials from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, according to documents. Tesla said that it knows of no crashes or injuries caused by feature.</p>

The recall covers Model S sedans and X SUVs from 2016 through 2022, as well as 2017 to 2022 Model 3 sedans and 2020 through 2022 Model Y SUVs.

Technology Now in Beta

Selected Tesla drivers are “beta testing” the “Full Self-Driving” software on public roads. The company says the cars cannot drive themselves and drivers must be ready to take action at all times.

A firmware release to disable the rolling stops is expected to be sent out in early February.

A message was left early Tuesday seeking comment from Tesla, which has disbanded its media relations department.

Safety advocates complain that Tesla should not be allowed to test the vehicles in traffic with untrained drivers, and that the Tesla software can malfunction, exposing other motorists and pedestrians to danger. Most of the other auto companies with similar software test with trained human safety drivers.

Tesla introduced the “rolling stop” feature in a software update that was sent out to the testing owners on Oct. 20. NHTSA met with Tesla on Jan. 10 and 19 to discuss how the software operates, the documents said. On Jan. 20, the company agreed to disable the rolling stops with the software update.

Owners will get required notification letters on March 28.

The “rolling stop” feature let the Teslas go through all-way stop signs as long as the owner enabled the function. The vehicles have to be traveling below 5.6 mph while approaching the intersection, and no “relevant” moving cars, pedestrians or bicyclists can be detected nearby. All roads leading to the intersection had to have speed limits of 30 mph or less, the documents said. The Teslas would then be allowed to go through the intersection at 0.1 mph to 5.6 mph without coming to a complete stop.

Switched Lanes, Crashed

In November, NHTSA said it was looking into a complaint from a Tesla driver that the “Full Self-Driving” software caused a crash. The driver complained to the agency that the Model Y went into the wrong lane and was hit by another vehicle. The SUV gave the driver an alert halfway through the turn, and the driver tried to turn the wheel to avoid other traffic, according to the complaint. But the car took control and “forced itself into the incorrect lane,” the driver reported. No one was hurt in the Nov. 3 crash in Brea, California, according to the complaint.

In December, Tesla agreed to update its less sophisticated “Autopilot” driver-assist system after NHTSA opened an investigation. The company agreed to stop allowing video games to be played on center touch screens while its vehicles are moving.

The agency also is investigating why Teslas on Autopilot have repeatedly crashed into emergency vehicles parked on roadways.

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HEADLINE	01/31 CDC travel warning Mexico, other countries
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2022/01/31/cdc-mexico-travel-warning-level-4/
GIST	<p>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has added 12 more destinations to its list of places that Americans should avoid due to “very high” levels of covid-19, including a popular nearby getaway.</p> <p>Mexico, which does not require visitors to show proof of vaccination or a negative coronavirus test, is now considered a “Level 4” country. States that include popular tourist destinations like Cabo San Lucas, Cancún and Mexico City have seen cases rise sharply amid the omicron surge.</p>

	<p>Other countries and territories that moved to the CDC's highest level on Monday are Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, French Guiana, Anguilla, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Kosovo, Moldova, Singapore and the Philippines. The "Level 4" list includes more than 100 destinations, with several popular Caribbean islands added last week.</p> <p>The CDC says people who must travel to these places should make sure they are up to date with their coronavirus vaccinations.</p> <p>"Even if you are up to date with your COVID-19 vaccines, you may still be at risk for getting and spreading COVID-19," the agency says.</p> <p>In addition to soaring coronavirus cases, Mexico has been grappling with high-profile acts of violence in resort towns in recent months. Last week, the manager of beach club was shot to death in Playa del Carmen days after two Canadians were killed in a shooting at a nearby hotel. A beach shootout near Cancún in November forced tourists to run into hotels for safety.</p> <p>The U.S. State Department changed its travel advisory for Monday to "Level 4" — which means "do not travel" — due to covid-19.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Majority of states virus cases declining
SOURCE	https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2022-01-31/u-s-coronavirus-cases-drop-as-infections-decrease-in-majority-of-states
GIST	<p>Nationwide coronavirus cases are declining as the vast majority of states report a decrease in new infections.</p> <p>The U.S. was averaging more than 540,000 new cases per day on Friday, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That's a drop from the previous high of nearly 800,000 cases reported on average each day in mid-January.</p> <p>It's still well above any previous peak the country has seen. And although cases and hospitalizations are declining, average daily deaths are still increasing.</p> <p>CDC Director Rochelle Walensky warned last week that while omicron is less severe than previous strains, it is still causing significant damage.</p> <p>"Importantly, 'milder' does not mean 'mild,' and we cannot look past the strain on our health systems and substantial number of deaths – nearing 2,200 a day as a result of the extremely transmissible omicron variant," Walensky said at a press conference.</p> <p>Most states are seeing a downward trend in new coronavirus cases, including states that first saw omicron surges, like New York and Connecticut.</p> <p>Despite the trend, every state is still experiencing a "high" level of community transmission, according to the CDC.</p> <p>And a handful of states, including Montana and Washington, are still reporting a rise in infections.</p> <p>Leading infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci last week said the U.S. has a "way to go" before reaching an "acceptable situation" with COVID-19.</p> <p>The country must reach a "level of control that does not disrupt us in society, does not dominate our lives, does not prevent us to do the things that we generally do under normal existence," he said.</p>

	"That would be a level of infection, but more importantly, concentrating on the severity of disease, hospitalizations and deaths that fall within the category of what we generally accept," Fauci said. "We don't like it, but we accept it."
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HEADLINE	01/31 Navy SEALs stop using state parks
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/navy-seals-to-stop-using-washington-state-parks-after-residents-voice-fears-of-seeing-armed-men
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON - The U.S. Navy is pausing SEAL training at Washington state parks while a legal battle over their use winds its way through the courts.</p> <p>"It is difficult to find peace in the woods when armed frogmen might be lurking behind every tree," lawyers for the Whidbey Environmental Action Network, the group behind the lawsuit against the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission, argued in a legal brief filed last month.</p> <p>The Navy has used Washington state coastal parks for over 30 years for SEAL cold water training and other special operations exercises, with leaders saying the area offers the perfect environment to simulate what the elite forces may encounter on difficult operations overseas.</p> <p>"This area provides a unique environment of cold water, extreme tidal changes, multi-variant currents, low visibility, complex underwater terrain, climate and rigorous land terrain, which provides an advanced training environment," Navy spokesman Joe Overton told Coffee or Die Magazine.</p> <p>But the Navy's use of Washington shoreline has recently come under fire from local residents who are concerned about both the physiological and environmental impact the SEAL training can have on others using the parks.</p> <p>"I do not care to catch a glimpse of apparently armed men skulking around and I DEFINITELY do not want to risk having my young grandchildren see such a sight," a resident wrote to state regulators during a public comment period while the state was attempting to renew its agreement with the Navy.</p> <p>Other residents expressed similar concerns, arguing that the parks are supposed to serve as a place to relax for residents.</p> <p>"In these days of great division in our civil society, we don't need stealthy men in camo uniforms toting toy guns around our State and County Parks," another commenter said. "People frequent parks to escape tension, not to encounter more. Keep the Navy commando training out of our parks!"</p> <p>Another commenter expressed concerns over UAVs, arguing, "The Navy's plan is to use larger, gasoline-powered UAV's as well as smaller, electric-powered types. This offers significant potential for direct and indirect injury to birds as well as auditory disruption to the experience of park visitors."</p> <p>The complaints led to the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission in a 4-3 vote to agree to a scaled-back training that would limit where and what time SEALs could train, prompting the lawsuit to block the use of state parks entirely.</p> <p>The lawsuit contends that the training may dissuade residents from using the parks over fears of "encountering the proposed war games or being spied upon by Navy personnel."</p> <p>The Navy contends that SEAL training in the parks has not interfered with visitors, noting that there is no use of live-fire ammunition or explosive devices.</p> <p>But that reassurance has not convinced local residents who say the Navy should use the 46 miles of Washington shoreline already under its jurisdiction, an area the Navy said does not offer as much realism to SEALs.</p>

	"Although there are several Navy properties in the area, they do not provide the full range of environments needed for this training to be as realistic as possible," Overton said.
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HEADLINE	02/01 Scariest thing: children living with long Covid
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/feb/01/children-long-covid-coronavirus
GIST	<p>Javanese Hailey found her daughter hunched over in pain inside their home in Manassas, Virginia, about 32 miles south-west of Washington DC.</p> <p>The nine-year-old could barely walk because her stomach hurt so much, Hailey said, recalling that Sunday evening in October.</p> <p>So, she asked her basketball- and gymnastics-loving fourth-grader the question that had become routine in recent weeks: on a scale of zero to 10, how bad is the pain?</p> <p>It's above 10, her daughter, Haley Bryson, told her.</p> <p>For about two months, Haley had experienced some combination of headache, fatigue, stomachache, sore throat, earache or breathlessness – reporting pain levels normally around six or seven. She would collapse into bed when she got home from school and ended up losing 17lb from her already small frame, her mother said.</p> <p>“There did not seem to be a pattern to her symptoms,” said Hailey, a middle and high school math teacher. “Some days were worse than others. Some days she couldn’t even get out of the bed because her stomach hurt so much.”</p> <p>She added: “It was the scariest thing I ever experienced in my life.”</p> <p>The symptoms began soon after Haley and her mother contracted Covid-19 in early August. They both had a relatively mild reaction and recovered. But days later, Haley became sick again.</p> <p>In October, after more than half a dozen trips to her pediatrician, urgent care and the emergency room, she was referred to Children’s National hospital in Washington DC, diagnosed with long Covid and treated in its Pediatric Post-Covid Program, which treats all ages up to 21.</p> <p>Though long covid diagnosis is considered very rare in children, Haley is not alone. Some children across the US have reported an array of symptoms – ranging from headaches, stomachaches and dizziness, to fatigue, brain fog and mood changes – long after their initial infection.</p> <p>Long Covid can last anywhere from four weeks to months – although definitions vary – and, while it presents differently based on developmental stage, doctors say it can affect virtually any age, even infants.</p> <p>Of the more than 848,000 people who have died in the US from Covid during the pandemic, 727 have been under age 18, according to the CDC. Less than 1.5% of child Covid cases have resulted in hospitalization, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP).</p> <p>However, vaccine availability and uptake for children has consistently lagged behind adults in the US. It wasn’t until May that the CDC recommended the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine for children ages 12 to 15, and then not until November that it recommended it for those ages five to 11. Children under the age of five are still not eligible.</p> <p>Only 20% of five- to 11-year-olds have been fully vaccinated, and 55% of 12-to-17-year-olds, while all adult age groups are at least 60%, according to the CDC.</p>

Plenty of questions surround pediatric long Covid, including exactly how common it is. One Danish study published in the European Journal of Pediatrics in December surveyed about 37,500 children. It found less than 1% of Covid-positive children reported symptoms lasting more than four weeks, compared with a control group. A report from April out of Italy that surveyed 129 children who tested positive for Covid found that about 43% experienced at least one symptom more than 60 days after their initial infection.

In recent months, doctors at some pediatric Covid centers have reported an increase in referrals and patient load. Some have set about expanding clinics or restructuring schedules, while others have found themselves working their way through long waitlists.

The reason for the increase is probably twofold, explained Laura Malone, a physician at the Kennedy Krieger Institute's Pediatric Post-Covid-19 Rehabilitation Clinic. There is a lot more understanding and acceptance of the condition, leading more families to seek treatment. At the same time, there has also probably been an uptick in long Covid cases following the Delta-fueled surge, as it can take months before patients with the condition are diagnosed and treated after infection.

"The larger the denominator, the more people you have that do have the infection, the more numbers or higher numbers you're going to get with those with complications from it, like long Covid," explained Malone, who said Kennedy Krieger's clinic has had to expand twice over the last six to eight months due to an increase in cases.

Over the past year, the clinic, which meets three half days a month, has seen 47 patients, with over one-third of those patients coming in September, October and November.

Dr Alexandra Brugler Yonts, director of the Pediatric Post-Covid Program at the Children's National hospital, said they are booked out until March. She explained that over half of the program's 60 patients had come in just the last three months, despite opening in May 2021.

"A lot of the thought is, 'Oh it's just a cold, you know, we get through that.' But we don't yet know why certain folks get long Covid and others do not," she said. "And so you're getting infected, you're taking a gamble, rolling the dice that you might, hopefully won't be one of the ones that has long-term complications."

The long Covid clinic at Texas Children's hospital, which has seen a total of 62 patients, has been at its max of six patients or higher a month since September, according to Dr Kristen Sexson Tejtzel, its co-director. It's now in the process of increasing from half days to full days to double the number of patients it can see.

Dr Sarah Risen, its co-director, said increased awareness of long Covid is probably causing at least part of the swell.

"With this increased awareness and acceptance, it allows providers also to start to diagnose and treat and help support the child and the family earlier," She said.

Dr Carlos Oliveira, pediatric infectious diseases doctor at Yale Medicine, said the Yale New Haven children's post-Covid care program received 6-8 long covid referrals per month between August and November.

He said there are only theories about what causes long Covid. One hypothesis is that some of the virus proteins linger in the body and continually leak into the bloodstream, causing an immune system reaction. Another one is that it's a type of autoimmune process in which antibodies made against the virus attack the host, leading to damage long after the virus is gone.

There have been several studies launched in recent months into long Covid. In an especially large-scale effort, the US National Institutes of Health announced it was starting nationwide studies. The research will include children.

In the meantime, Dr Frank Bell, pediatric infectious disease physician at Swedish medical center in Seattle and a member of the Washington Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics board of trustees, emphasized the importance of vaccination.

“By being careful about your exposures ... and by being immunized, and by your supporting kids in their recovery from Covid, we think we’ve got a good way to bring that small risk down to something that’s even less likely to happen and be a worry for an individual child or his or her family,” he said.

Doctors have already begun to prepare for the impact the Omicron surge could have on the numbers of long Covid cases.

“It’s hard for me to say what will happen, but we are preparing for a large wave of kids ... because the numbers of adolescents and children who have been infected are so high,” said Oliveira.

“It’s bound to lead to a higher number of long Covid based on the numbers alone.”

For Haley, who recently turned 10, five months after her initial infection, her mother said virtually all of her symptoms have finally gone away. But the fear has not.

Each time her daughter complains of a minor stomachache or headache, Hailey said she gets worried that the condition has returned.

“It just takes me back in a flashback to everything that we went through,” she said.

But Haley said she’s just happy to be feeling better so she can get back to her playdates and gymnastics.

“I can have more playdates and have more fun on playdates. I can do arts and crafts and gymnastics and kind of just be silly and run around the stairs and stuff,” she said.

When asked what her pain level is now, she said with little hesitation: “Zero!”

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HEADLINE	01/31 England: cases spike; reinfections included
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/31/spike-in-covid-cases-in-england-as-reinfections-included-for-first-time
GIST	<p>Another 92,000 Covid cases were reported for England on Monday, a steep rise on the day before, after reinfections were included in the statistics for the first time.</p> <p>Previously daily Covid case figures – which reflect the number of new infections picked up by testing – did not include reinfections for England, Scotland or Northern Ireland, although figures for Wales did, provided the positive tests were more than 42 days apart. In other words, most people were only counted once even if they had caught Covid multiple times.</p> <p>However, as the pandemic has gone on, the absence of reinfections in case data led to concerns, with experts noting that a previous infection provides little protection against Omicron, while – two years into the pandemic – there is a bigger pool of people who have had Covid at least once before.</p> <p>Scientists noted that it was also important to include reinfections in order to understand the dynamics of the spread of immune-evasive variants that emerge, while it also sheds light on why some individuals may get infected over and over.</p> <p>“This is likely to be a combination of risk – due to exposure – plus inherent likelihood of becoming infected, once exposed,” said Prof Rowland Kao, an epidemiologist at the University of Edinburgh. “We need to know these things in order to better target interventions of various sorts – how important, for</p>

example, particularly workplaces are likely to be, and how some individuals are therefore going to be exposed to more risk.”

The new approach means that reinfections will be now included in daily Covid case figures for England and Northern Ireland, with such episodes defined as a positive specimen at least 90 days after the last one – a gap that captures the majority of reinfections but ensures those who simply shed the virus for longer after an infection are excluded from the data.

[While data from the UK Health Security Agency](#) suggests some reinfections may occur in a shorter time period, this is a relatively small proportion of potential reinfections.

The Guardian understands data for cases in Scotland will also include reinfections in the coming weeks, while data for cases Wales will switch in the coming weeks to using the 90-day 90-day episode length.

Under the current, mixed definitions in use, 92,368 new Covid cases were reported for the UK on Monday, up from 69,007 the day before, with 81,720 reported for England alone compared with 59,559 on Sunday before reinfections were included.

The Guardian understands reinfections were not originally included in the daily case data across all the countries of the UK because at the beginning of the pandemic it was unclear whether they occurred and, if reinfections did happen, what the interval between infections was. While reinfection figures have since been tracked by public health bodies, [and released in reports](#), the daily case figures have not – until now – included such episodes.

While the inclusion of reinfections means the case-fatality risk – the proportion of people reported to be [diagnosed](#) with Covid who go on to die – will fall, Prof Sir David Spiegelhalter, a statistician at the University of Cambridge, cautioned the measure remains problematic.

“We have always known that the daily number of reported cases was a substantial undercount of the actual number of infections – the ONS Covid Infection Survey shows that we have to at least double the daily count,” he said.

“Including reinfections will be an improvement, and will reduce the apparent case-fatality rate, but nobody should have taken this very seriously anyway. The case-fatality ratio is inevitably an overestimate of what is the better measure – the infection fatality ratio, ie the proportion of those who are infected who die, whether or not they become confirmed cases.”

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HEADLINE	02/01 FBI: China threat more ‘brazen, damaging’
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/01/china-more-brazen-and-damaging-than-ever-says-fbi-director
GIST	<p>The threat to the west from the Chinese government is “more brazen, more damaging” than ever before, FBI director Christopher Wray has said, accusing Beijing of stealing American ideas and innovation and launching massive hacking operations.</p> <p>The speech at the Reagan Presidential Library in California on Monday amounted to a stinging rebuke of the Chinese government just days before Beijing is set to occupy the global stage by hosting the Winter Olympics.</p> <p>In another salvo from the US towards China on Monday, billionaire George Soros said Chinese president Xi Jinping was the “greatest threat” to open society throughout the world. However, he added in his speech that the crisis engulfing China’s “unsustainable” property market could be the downfall of Xi, along with other mounting problems such as containing Omicron, the pursuit of total social control, and a plummeting birthrate.</p>

Wray's remarks made clear that even as American foreign policy remains consumed by Russia-Ukraine tensions, the US continues to regard [China](#) as its biggest threat to long-term economic security.

"When we tally up what we see in our investigations, over 2,000 of which are focused on the Chinese government trying to steal our information or technology, there's just no country that presents a broader threat to our ideas, innovation, and economic security than China," Wray said, according to a copy of the speech provided by the FBI.

The bureau is opening new cases to counter Chinese intelligence operations every 12 hours or so, Wray said, with Chinese government hackers pilfering more personal and corporate data than all other countries combined

"The harm from the Chinese government's economic espionage isn't just that its companies pull ahead based on illegally gotten technology. While they pull ahead, they push our companies and workers behind," Wray said. "That harm – company failures, job losses – has been building for a decade to the crush we feel today. It's harm felt across the country, by workers in a whole range of industries."

Chinese government officials have repeatedly rejected accusations from the US government, with the spokesperson for the embassy in Washington saying in July last year that Americans have made "groundless attacks" and malicious smears about Chinese cyber-attacks. The statement described China as a "staunch defender of cybersecurity".

The threat from China is hardly new, but it has also not abated over the past decade.

"I've spoken a lot about this threat since I became director" in 2017, Wray said. "But I want to focus on it here tonight because it's reached a new level – more brazen, more damaging, than ever before, and it's vital, vital that all of us focus on that threat together."

'The system is built on credit'

Speaking at a Hoover Institution panel on China, Soros said the victory of open societies "can't be taken for granted" in a world teetering on the edge of military aggression in Ukraine and Taiwan.

However, Xi Jinping's attempt to impose "total control" on China through a strategy of city-wide lockdowns, could jeopardise his chances of staying in power, Soros claimed, because they are "unlikely to work against a variant as infectious as Omicron".

Despite Xi's firm control over the military and his tools of repression and surveillance, Soros said that it should not be assumed, given strong internal opposition, that the president will stay in power. He rules by "intimidation" and "nobody dares to tell him what he doesn't want to hear", he said.

The Soros comments appeared timed to coincide with the run-up to the Winter Olympics, although several countries – including the US and UK – will not be sending any diplomats in protest at human rights abuses in Xinjiang and elsewhere.

Soros also argued that the world's second-biggest economy has become too dependent on using "unsustainable" property development to power growth since Xi took power in 2013.

The sector that accounts for about 30% of Chinese economic output was faltering with high-profile failures such as Evergrande spreading throughout the industry, leaving "people's confidence shaken" and the economy struggling, he said.

Add in the disruption caused by trying to stamp out every case of the Covid-19, and a falling population that will lead to labour shortages, and China's economic growth could not be taken for granted.

	<p>“The model on which the real estate boom is based is unsustainable. People buying apartments have to start paying for them even before they are built. So, the system is built on credit. Local governments derive most of their revenues from selling land at ever-rising prices.</p> <p>The fall in prices already under way in many parts of China “will turn many of those who invested the bulk of their savings in real estate against Xi”, Soros claimed.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Stocks higher; worst month since Mar 2020
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/global-stocks-markets-dow-update-01-31-2022-11643618420?mod=hp_lead_pos1&mod=hp_lead_pos1
GIST	<p>The S&P 500 rose Monday but closed out its worst month since March 2020 as expectations for higher interest rates erode enthusiasm for stocks.</p> <p>The broad U.S. stock index retreated 5.3% in volatile trading in January as investors wrestle with the question of how tighter monetary policy will influence equity valuations. High inflation and a strong labor market have led Federal Reserve officials to accelerate their plans for unwinding support for the economy.</p> <p>The central bank last week signaled that it would begin steadily raising rates in mid-March. Adding to investors’ anxieties in recent weeks: the possibility of a Russian invasion of Ukraine and the surge of the Omicron variant of Covid-19.</p> <p>The suite of concerns has led to declines across the stock market, with 10 of the S&P 500’s 11 sectors retreating in the new year. Only energy stocks have bucked the downward trend.</p> <p>“January really snuck up on a lot of people,” said Wayne Wicker, chief investment officer at MissionSquare Retirement. “Everybody was predicting volatility, but I think the declines in January probably exceeded expectations.”</p> <p>The shift by the Federal Reserve unsettles a key support for stocks. Investors credit the central bank’s near-zero short-term interest rates and program of bond-buying with helping fuel the stock market’s run from its lows of March 2020. Even after pulling back in recent weeks, the S&P 500 is trading at about double that month’s closing low.</p> <p>On the final trading day of January, the S&P 500 advanced 83.70 points, or 1.9% to 4515.55. The Dow Jones Industrial Average gained 406.39 points, or 1.2%, to 35131.86. The tech-heavy Nasdaq Composite advanced 469.31 points, or 3.4%, to 14239.88, chipping away at its monthly losses. The day’s gains built on a rally Friday for all three indexes.</p> <p>Technology stocks have slumped this month as investors consider how rising interest rates could weigh on the group’s pricey valuations, which are based in part on expectations for growth far into the future. Microsoft shares dropped 7.5% in January, while Nvidia’s slumped 17%.</p> <p>The Nasdaq Composite fell 9% in January, its largest one-month decline since March 2020. The Dow Jones Industrial Average fared better, losing 3.3% for the month.</p> <p>“Tech was just very highly valued, very overbought,” said Dustin Thackeray, chief investment officer at Crewe Advisors. “It was certainly due for a pullback.”</p> <p>Trading in January has featured big days both up and down, as well as sharp intraday reversals.</p> <p>“There has been extreme volatility so far this year,” said Louise Dudley, an equities portfolio manager at Federated Hermes. “People are particularly worried with the interest-rate expectations continuing to get higher. We’re definitely seeing from the U.S. that they’re very on top of the inflation numbers—they’re going to do everything they can.”</p>

Ms. Dudley said she expects that volatility will lessen as investors get more clarity over whether inflation has peaked and how companies expect to be impacted by higher prices for energy, labor and materials.

Traders who look to January as an indicator of stock performance later in the year may have been dismayed. When the S&P 500 has fallen 5% or more in January, it has gone on to gain just 2.7% on average in the rest of the year, according to a Dow Jones Market Data analysis of performance since the index's 1957 launch.

Investors are listening for clues about companies' expectations as corporate earnings season continues. Analysts expect that profits from companies in the S&P 500 rose 24% in the fourth quarter from a year earlier, according to FactSet. About one-third of companies in the index have reported.

Strong earnings reports, coupled with the depth of the stock-price declines in January, make some investors think the market may rise from here.

"I think there's a good chance that last week marked a short-term bottom," said Andrew Slimmon, senior portfolio manager at Morgan Stanley Investment Management. "The fundamentals have not validated the weakness"

Among individual stocks, shares of Netflix jumped \$42.78, or 11%, to \$427.14 on Monday after a ratings upgrade from Citigroup and share purchases by Co-Chief Executive Reed Hastings. Still, the stock ended January down 29%, its worst month since April 2012.

U.S.-listed shares of Sony rose \$4.82, or 4.5%, to \$111.66 after Sony Interactive Entertainment LLC said it is buying videogame developer Bungie. Earlier in January Microsoft said it would buy videogame giant Activision Blizzard.

Citrix Systems shares fell \$3.61, or 3.4%, to \$101.94 as the cloud-computing company said it would be taken private in an all-cash acquisition valued at \$16.5 billion.

Shares of L3Harris Technologies dropped \$9.38, or 4.3%, to \$209.29 after the aerospace and defense company gave a downbeat revenue outlook.

In bond markets, the yield on the benchmark 10-year U.S. Treasury note was little changed, edging up to 1.780% Monday from 1.779% Friday. The monthly yield gain was the largest since March 2021. Yields rise as bond prices fall.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude gained 17% for the month to \$91.21 per barrel, its highest settle value since October 2014. Some analysts predict the price of oil will head even higher.

The price of gold slipped in January, losing 1.8% to \$1795.00 per troy ounce. Bitcoin fell 17% in January to \$38,443.54 at 5 p.m. ET Monday.

Overseas, the pan-continental Stoxx Europe 600 gained 0.7% for the day. In Asia, markets were closed in China and South Korea for a holiday. Hong Kong's Hang Seng and Japan's Nikkei 225 each added more than 1%.

Macau Legend Development shares fell 19% in Hong Kong after media reports of the arrest of its chief executive over the weekend, on suspicion of money laundering and illegal gambling, including operating online casinos.

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HEADLINE	01/31 NATO leaders stream to Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/nato-leaders-stream-to-ukraine-showing-support-as-russia-masses-troops-11643657492?mod=hp_lead_pos2

GIST

Several Western leaders and foreign ministers are scheduled to visit Kyiv in the coming days in a flurry of diplomatic activity that aims to deter a possible [Russian invasion of Ukraine](#) and find a peaceful way out of the crisis.

This show of presence, coupled with weapons deliveries by some of these countries, intends to demonstrate solidarity with Kyiv just as Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) massed [more than 100,000 troops](#) around Ukraine, in what Washington says could be an imminent invasion.

Moscow denies it seeks war but says it won't tolerate Ukraine, which isn't a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, falling into [the Western alliance's orbit](#).

Foreign leaders scheduled to visit Ukraine this week include the prime ministers of the U.K., the Netherlands and Poland, and the president of Turkey. Several foreign ministers, including of Germany and France, are also slated to arrive this and next week.

France and Germany, in particular, [are pursuing negotiations](#) that could give Mr. Putin a face-saving way to de-escalate, focusing on moves to advance [the long-stalled Minsk-2 agreement](#) on the role of the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine. Russian and Ukrainian officials last week met in Paris to revive talks on the Minsk-2 agreement that remains unimplemented since its signing in 2015, with another round slated for next week in Berlin.

French President Emmanuel Macron spoke with Mr. Putin for the second time in several days Monday. A Kremlin read-out said they discussed in detail Russia's security demands and may meet for further talks.

"World leaders try to find their role, how to be part of a solution in what is happening around Ukraine, and it's a good thing because this attracts attention," said Oleksandr Danylyuk, who served as national-security adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and now heads the Center for National Resilience and Development think tank in Kyiv.

"What could be bad is that, by stepping in, they would be looking for something that brings some results—and the risk could be that this solution could be at our expense, at the expense of Ukraine," he said.

When the crisis began late last year, with the Kremlin insisting on dealing directly with Washington and dismissing the Ukrainian government as a Western puppet, Ukrainian officials feared that their country's fate could be decided without them. "Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine," became the mantra of Ukrainian diplomats, who tout the parade of senior Western officials landing in Kyiv as proof their approach is succeeding.

"Russia didn't expect this level of solidarity of the world with Ukraine when it began this escalation," Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said Monday. "The tens of tons of defensive weapons, equipment and ammunition that arrive in Ukraine today create a ton of arguments that strengthen Ukraine's negotiating position. All these weapons are needed precisely so that we wouldn't need to use them," he said.

While Germany has long refused to send arms to Ukraine, several NATO nations have moved in recent days to reduce gaps in Ukraine's defense capabilities. The U.K. has provided around 2,000 light antitank missile systems, the U.S. has sent another batch of Javelin antitank missiles, and the Baltic states have shipped U.S.-made Stinger antiaircraft missiles. The U.K. and France have said they could add troops to fortify NATO's eastern flank.

Turkey, whose President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is slated to visit Kyiv later this week, has long worked with Ukraine on Bayraktar TB2 armed drones that proved a game-changer in Azerbaijan's war against Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020. Ukraine began using the Bayraktars in Donbas last fall.

“Ankara does genuinely worry about Russian expansion, has cultivated a special relationship with Ukraine, and has been consistently supportive of independence of post-Soviet republics,” said Asli Aydintasbas, a Turkey expert at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

She added, however, that Mr. Erdogan is also aware of the fact that Turkish troops are able to operate in Syria only thanks to Russian acquiescence, a pressure point limiting Ankara’s ability to offer Ukraine significant assistance. “Russia has huge leverage,” she said. “He can go only so far in Ukraine.”

Poland, whose Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki is slated to come to Kyiv on Tuesday for a meeting with Mr. Zelensky, said Monday it would be willing to send anti-aircraft missiles to Ukraine if Kyiv approved that offer. “We are ready to deliver it at any minute,” said the head of Poland’s National Security Bureau, Paweł Soloch.

The missiles are part of a larger supply of ammunition, weaponry and medical supplies that Poland is offering its eastern neighbor, Mr. Soloch said, without specifying the other arms involved.

The European Union’s Trade Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis was in Kyiv on Monday to hammer out details of a financial package of at least €1.2 billion, equivalent to about \$1.35 billion, that the bloc announced last week. The EU is expected to announce additional support for Kyiv in coming weeks.

In Brussels, EU officials are still working on a package of financial, export-control and energy sanctions they are lining up in case of a Russian invasion of Ukraine while the bloc has dialed up both support for Kyiv in recent days and dialogue with Moscow. A senior EU official said Monday they hope to get the package completed over the next week.

One major exception to the Western displays of solidarity with Ukraine is Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who is set to visit Moscow and meet with Mr. Putin on Tuesday. Mr. Orbán—who has governed Hungary for half its postcommunist history—has an antagonistic relationship with Ukraine, and accuses Kyiv of violating the education rights of ethnic Hungarians in a part of western Ukraine that once belonged to Hungary. Mr. Orbán has used Hungary’s veto in the 30-member NATO to block the military alliance’s formal meetings with Ukraine. At the same time, his government has so far signed up to EU calls to impose severe sanctions on Russia if it invades Ukraine, and regularly agrees to renew existing EU sanctions.

Mr. Orbán has become close with Mr. Putin in the past decade as he fell out with successive U.S. governments that he felt were too critical of his moves to consolidate state authority over media and academia. His planned Moscow trip has already sparked criticism from the Hungarian opposition.

“Russia, which is considering invading Ukraine, is asking us to betray our allies, renounce our sovereignty, and render our country militarily defenseless,” said United for Hungary, the country’s main opposition alliance. “In this tense situation it is treasonous to go to Moscow.”

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HEADLINE	01/31 Pandemic made a hole in US: 1M deaths
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/one-million-deaths-the-hole-the-pandemic-made-in-u-s-society-11643662159?mod=hp_lead_pos5
GIST	<p>Two years into the Covid-19 pandemic, America’s death toll is closing in on one million.</p> <p>Federal authorities estimate that 987,456 more people have died since early 2020 than would have otherwise been expected, based on long-term trends. People killed by coronavirus infections account for the overwhelming majority of cases. Thousands more died from derivative causes, like disruptions in their healthcare and a spike in overdoses.</p>

Covid-19 has left the same proportion of the population dead—about 0.3%—as did World War II, and in less time.

Unlike the 1918 flu pandemic or major wars, which hit younger people, Covid-19 has been particularly hard on vulnerable seniors. It has also killed thousands of front-line workers and disproportionately affected minority populations.

It robbed society of grandparents, parents, spouses, sons and daughters, best friends, mentors, loyal employees and bosses. Those lost include a 55-year-old Rhode Island correctional officer; a 46-year-old Texas dental-office receptionist who helped care for her granddaughter; a 30-year-old Iowan who fatally overdosed; and an active 72-year-old and grandmother of 15 who was Nashville's first female city bus driver.

"It's catastrophic," said Steven Woolf, director emeritus at the Center on Society and Health at Virginia Commonwealth University. "This is an enormous loss of life."

It could take years to fully realize the lasting social changes the pandemic and its human toll will yield. Major wars can redraw maps, shift the balance of global power and leave memorials in the nation's capital. The pandemic is a reminder our biggest enemies are often too small to see.

Epidemiologists commonly measure excess deaths to gauge the full impact of major events, from heat waves to hurricanes. For the pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention calculated the excess by comparing deaths from each week of the pandemic to averages from the prior six years. The agency makes some adjustments to account for factors such as the time it takes to collect death certificates; declines in other causes of death such as influenza that offset some Covid-19 deaths; and the possibility some people who died of Covid-19 might have died from something else by now.

In 2019, the U.S. recorded 2.85 million deaths, following a climb of about 1.6% a year over the decade as the population grew and aged. In 2020, the number ballooned by 18.5% to 3.38 million deaths. Last year, provisional data show 3.42 million deaths.

The CDC has registered roughly 875,000 Covid-19 fatalities on death certificates. In at least 90% of those cases, the disease is listed as the underlying cause, the agency said. For the remainder, it was listed as a contributing cause.

The 'anchor'

A Wall Street Journal analysis of CDC data shows the pandemic has weighed especially heavily on the elderly, fueled by the risk older people face from serious Covid-19 cases. There are roughly 700,000 excess deaths among people 65 and up, about 1.5% of that population, the Journal's analysis shows.

One of those lost, Edwin Norse, a 75-year-old Army veteran and retired chief financial officer in Raleigh, N.C., was the adhesive that bonded his large family together.

He kept constant tabs on his six grown children, making sure they called each other, including the youngest brother, who is deaf. An amateur poet, Mr. Norse distributed thousands of sonnets to friends and family, who also risked getting "Norsed" by his many pranks.

"He was kind of this anchor for all of us, trying to keep us all together," said his daughter Kristin Norse, who is 53.

The pandemic gave him a chance to watch via Zoom all of her oral arguments in Florida, where she works as an appellate lawyer. He read all her legal briefs and checked in whenever the urge struck, including during her busy work hours.

"Oh my gosh," she said, laughing. "The calls in the middle of the day."

He died from Covid-19 complications in January 2021, after falling ill just before he could get vaccinated. Before then he lived independently in a senior apartment complex. The family is still reeling.

“There is this kind of space that our soul or spirit takes up,” said Angela Randall, 43, another daughter. “And to have that disappear for so many people so quickly can only leave this great absence. How do we fill that void?”

One study, published in the scientific journal PLOS One last September estimates that roughly [7.4 million years of life were lost in the U.S. in 2020 alone](#), with 73% of them attributable directly to Covid-19.

“It’s sad that people die, but their struggle is over,” said Toni Miles, an epidemiologist at the University of Georgia College of Public Health, who studies the population health effects of deaths of friends and family members. “It’s the people who are left behind.”

Joyce Gibbs, an 86-year-old retired teacher who lived in Philadelphia, took to Zoom during the pandemic to attend meetings for groups like the Bethel A.M.E. Church of Ardmore and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Sometimes she would dress up to go on screen, or help others set up virtual backgrounds.

She also had a standing Friday cocktails-by-phone appointment with her nephew, New York City real-estate broker Gregory Smith. Although vaccinated, she died in the fall of 2021, struck down by a breakthrough infection.

“She was the person I called for everything,” Mr. Smith said, adding that he feels the absence of the voice mails that she would leave for him. He said he looked hard to find solace in her passing. “The joy that I found was that we were so close,” he said. “None of us are getting out of here alive, so I just try to show up for life every day now.”

‘I’m Lost’

The federal government has counted more than 145,000 Covid-19 deaths among nursing-home residents, most in the pandemic’s first year, before vaccines curbed [the risk faced by this vulnerable population](#). At least 2,250 nursing-home staffers have died from Covid-19, too.

Overall, the excess death toll includes about 140,000 people of prime working age—25 to 54, according to the Journal’s analysis.

Through the end of December, about 192,500 children under 18 have lost a parent or another primary caregiver to Covid-19, said Susan Hillis, lead author of a recent CDC report on the topic. Nonwhite children faced the steepest loss, she said.

“This is a lot more than a ripple. It is a tidal wave,” Dr. Hillis said.

Another study, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in July 2020, [estimated that each Covid-19 death affects an average of nine close relatives](#).

Richard Carchia, a father of three and veteran Rhode Island correctional officer, died from Covid-19 on Dec. 29, 2021. The 55-year-old was fully vaccinated, including a booster shot, hit the gym daily and worked the second shift at a medium-security prison. He was also undergoing chemotherapy for lymphoma.

During regular hikes—the family was trying to climb every 4,000-foot peak in New Hampshire—Mr. Carchia encouraged stepson Raymond Skomin, 26, to follow in his footsteps as a correction officer. He wept when Mr. Skomin passed a key step in the hiring process this past fall.

“He’s the one who built all my confidence and made me into the man I am today,” Mr. Skomin said. “We were inseparable.”

Mr. Carchia's wife, Cindy Carchia, normally works the overnight shift at a sleep-disorders lab, but hasn't felt up to returning yet.

"Life without Richard," she said, breaking into sobs. "I'm lost. I'm lost."

'A very old problem'

The pandemic exposed racial and ethnic disparities that already lurked in health outcomes. These disparities are one reason why the U.S. had a particularly high proportion of people who died in middle age or younger, said Dr. Woolf, who has studied the issue.

"Covid-19 was like a very acute, new example of a very old problem," he said.

The disparity showed in the deaths among prime-age workers, who are 25 to 54. Hispanic people make up 20% of this age group but 30% of its excess deaths, while Black people make up 14% and 25%, respectively. By comparison, white people account for 58% of the group and 35% of its excess deaths and Asian-Americans 8% and 3%, respectively.

Experts say the disparities stem from many factors, including different rates of occupational exposure, access to health care and pre-existing health conditions.

Veronica Perla, a 46-year-old who worked in a Irving, Texas, dental office, and her father, 70-year-old Freddy Perla, who worked with aluminum dyes and sang in a mariachi band, died within days of each other in late summer last year.

"I lost my best friends," said 24-year-old Amariss Perla, regarding her mother and grandfather. She works at a Western boot store, while also helping her husband run a lawn and irrigation business. "We were all one big village basically."

Her mother would drive over at 2 a.m., if Amariss couldn't figure out how to soothe her newborn daughter Alessandra, who is now 2. Amariss's grandfather stopped by often, too, showing her recipes from his native El Salvador and teaching Alessandra to dance.

Veronica Perla fell ill in Texas shortly before her first appointment for a vaccine, which she had delayed, worried about side effects, a friend, Nora Aguinaga, said. Her doctor helped ease her worries. Mr. Perla had also put off getting vaccinated, though he intended to as well, too, Amariss Perla said.

She recently took Alessandra to visit their graves.

"The thing I'll miss most, and what I wish my daughter could know, is their love," Amariss said. "Their love was like no other."

Elizabeth Duff was the first woman to drive a Nashville city bus, according to her union. She was quiet and unflappable as she navigated racial and gender issues as a Black woman while also mentoring other workers during her three decades on the job, said Patrick Green, the president of the union, the Amalgamated Transit Union Local No. 1235. She was still helping run the union's chapter for retirees when she died of Covid-19 in February 2021 at 72, shortly before she was able to get vaccinated.

Her daughter, Virpi Carter, 56, said her mom was the family matriarch who was already ready to listen and dispense advice—even if it could be blunt. "You may have not always liked what she had to say," Ms. Carter said, chuckling. "She didn't sugarcoat anything."

She is haunted still by being unable to touch her mother before she lost consciousness from the virus.

"That vision is just embedded in my head that I couldn't hug my mom," she said. "It hurts me to talk about it."

Collateral damage

In explaining the overall excess death count, epidemiologists believe many Covid-19 deaths were never properly recorded as such, and that there were significant fatalities [resulting from other kinds of health and social problems that became amplified by the pandemic](#).

The degree to which these elements are influencing the numbers is uncertain. The U.S. was likely missing more Covid-19 deaths early in the pandemic, said Robert Anderson, chief of the mortality statistics branch at the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics. Tests to confirm cases were in short supply then, and doctors who fill out death certificates were still gaining familiarity with the virus.

It isn't always clear whether some categories of deaths that rose during the pandemic were directly linked. [Homicides have risen](#), for example, but there is debate among criminologists and law-enforcement officials about why.

A [surge in deaths among people with Alzheimer's disease and dementia](#) underscored a more direct impact: major disruptions in care, including as Covid-19 barreled through nursing homes and isolated seniors with significant care needs from their families. There is also evidence of rising deaths from other issues, including heart attacks, that could be linked to patients avoiding hospitals grappling with Covid-19 cases, physicians have said. Some of these surging health problems appeared most concentrated in the pandemic's early days.

Meantime, [U.S. drug overdose deaths](#), already at record highs, soared about 30% in 2020, and early data show [the toll may have worsened last year](#). The pandemic was [destabilizing for people already struggling with addiction, or trying to seek sobriety](#), parents of recent overdose victims say.

It was harder for Nick Fort to find addiction treatment, due to full beds and Covid-19 restrictions, according to his mother, Sally Fort. Though he sought help many times through years of struggles, he overdosed and died at 30 on a mix of fentanyl and cocaine at his suburban Des Moines, Iowa, home in early November.

A dog lover with a rescue named Bailey, Mr. Fort had been open about the challenges he faced, including a felony record linked to his drug problems, his mother said. He made clear that if he died, he wanted others to know what happened in hopes of erasing the stigma about addiction, she said.

"He had issues for many, many years," Mrs. Fort said. "Covid certainly didn't help it, because it drove him into isolation more than before."

Avoidable deaths

Epidemiologists say higher vaccination rates would have saved many people. Some of the hardest-hit places last year, in excess deaths per 100,000 residents, are Southern states with lower-than-average vaccination rates, federal data show. The U.S. has wide disparities in vaccine adoption, recently ranging from a 52.5% full-vaccination rate among Alabama's eligible population to 83.2% in Vermont and Rhode Island.

There are fears these losses will be forgotten on a broad scale, beyond those directly affected. The pandemic of 1918 faded quickly into the background, said Alex Navarro, assistant director of the Center for the History of Medicine at the University of Michigan. That event killed an estimated 675,000 people, nearly six times as many Americans as World War I, yet was overshadowed by the war, he said.

Though Covid-19 cases are fading now from record-breaking peaks hit during the Omicron variant-fueled surge, deaths, a lagging indicator, have recently averaged more than 2,000 reported each day. Omicron caused another significant round of disruptions at hospitals as patients flooded in and workers fell ill.

It will likely take years to fully realize the pandemic's toll, health experts say. The consequences of people delaying care for chronic illnesses, like diabetes, or [delaying cancer screenings](#) that could catch harmful

	<p>malignancies early have yet to be fully realized, said Gerald Harmon, a family physician in South Carolina who serves as president of the American Medical Association.</p> <p>“The impact on society is just beginning to be felt now,” he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/01 Somaliland offers US military access
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/somaliland-offers-u-s-military-access-to-port-airfield-as-it-pushes-for-nationhood-11643705732?mod=hp_featst_pos3
GIST	<p>NAIROBI—Somaliland, a peaceful corner of violent Somalia, is offering the U.S. military use of a seaport and airfield overlooking strategic maritime routes in exchange for steps toward recognizing the region as a sovereign country.</p> <p>Hoping to capitalize on growing U.S. concern over Chinese expansionism in Africa, Somaliland President Muse Bihi Abdi is planning a March visit to Washington, where he is expected to explore American interest in using the facilities in Berbera. The city sits on the Gulf of Aden, a key route linking the Indian Ocean, Suez Canal and Mediterranean Sea.</p> <p>“The president would definitely welcome a U.S. presence and protection of the waterways,” Somaliland Foreign Minister Essa Kayd said in an interview.</p> <p>“America should react very urgently,” Mr. Kayd said.</p> <p>For decades, Somaliland, a former British protectorate in northwest Somalia, has been conducting a fruitless campaign for international recognition as an independent state. But the latest push comes at an opportune moment.</p> <p>There is growing disenchantment in Washington with the U.S.-backed Somali national government in Mogadishu, which has delayed elections, become mired in political squabbling and, despite two decades of U.S. military assistance, failed to quash al-Shabaab, an al Qaeda affiliate that has vowed to attack American interests in Africa and elsewhere.</p> <p>That disillusion with Mogadishu, along with concerns about internecine warfare in neighboring Ethiopia and the recent military coup in Sudan, are contributing to a groundswell of sympathy on Capitol Hill for Somaliland, which stands out in the region for its democratic elections and peaceful streets.</p> <p>“The continued instability in the Horn of Africa and heightened global competition for resources and influence make it all the more important that we work with like-minded partners in the region, like Somaliland, committed to peace, democracy, and prosperity,” said Idaho Sen. Jim Risch, the ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee.</p> <p>The Biden administration is sticking with the long-held U.S. position that Somalia—which is riven by clan and regional divisions—should remain intact. Some African governments are reluctant to do anything that might encourage breakaway movements in their own countries.</p> <p>At the same time, American diplomats have made no secret of their frustration with Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, who has put off elections for more than a year and tried to extend his own term in office in the interim.</p> <p>In its closing days, the Trump administration pulled hundreds of U.S. commandos out of Somalia, where they had been training local forces to fight al-Shabaab, and moved them to neighboring Djibouti and Kenya. The Biden administration has yet to announce whether it will return American troops to bases in Somalia.</p> <p>The debate over Somaliland’s future comes as the U.S. and China jockey for influence in Africa.</p>

In 2017, China opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti, adjacent to Somaliland, on the Bab el-Mandeb strait, a critical choke point between the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The Chinese base, which U.S. officials say is big enough to dock an aircraft carrier and nuclear submarines, sits just 6 miles from the largest U.S. military base in Africa, Camp Lemonnier, which houses 4,500 U.S. troops.

Although it has shown no signs of wanting to do so, Djibouti could legally ask the U.S. to close its base at any time, leaving the American military scrambling to find another location.

U.S. intelligence agencies have concluded that Beijing also intends to establish a naval base in Equatorial Guinea, on Africa's Atlantic coast. Washington considers such a move especially threatening and is trying to persuade Equatorial Guinea's government to reject Chinese overtures.

Somaliland authorities see that superheated great-power competition as an opening to secure the international status they have long sought.

"If China occupies our country by force or by other means, then the waterways are going to be controlled by China," said Mr. Kayd, the Somaliland foreign minister.

Somaliland became independent from Britain in 1960, a few days before Somalia, then a trust territory administered by Italy, gained its own sovereignty. Dozens of countries recognized Somaliland before it entered into a union with Somalia.

That union crumbled in the late 1980s, when Somalia's strongman president, Mohamed Siad Barre, faced an uprising. His military bombed Hargeisa, Somaliland's capital, and killed tens of thousands of Somalilanders.

In 1991, Somaliland declared its independence, issuing its own currency and setting up its own army. Since then, the region has avoided much of the Islamist and clan violence that has racked southern Somalia.

Mogadishu, which faces separatist sentiments in several states, has rejected Somaliland's efforts to secure recognition as a sovereign state. Negotiations have failed to find a middle ground.

"It's very clear that Somalia won't accept dividing the country," said Abdirahman Yusuf Sheikh Al Adala, Somalia's deputy minister of information. He said the country's constitution forbids such a breakup.

Somaliland has already signaled its preference for inclusion in the Western camp.

Somaliland swapped diplomats with Taiwan in 2020, a slap at Beijing, which considers the island part of China, and an overture to China hawks in the U.S. "All of the sudden people who cared about China but didn't care about Africa perked up and paid attention," said J. Peter Pham, a former senior U.S. diplomat.

In August, when U.S. forces pulled out of Afghanistan, Somaliland offered to host thousands of refugees who had sided with the U.S. and were now fleeing the Taliban. The State Department declined the offer.

That same month, a U.S. transport plane landed in Berbera carrying dozens of American military personnel who conducted an assessment of the port and airfield, according to local and U.S. officials. The runway is among the longest in Africa and at one point was designated an emergency landing strip for NASA's space shuttle.

The Emirati logistics company DP World owns 65% of the port, with Somaliland retaining 35%, according to the Somaliland government.

The U.S. military has "Djibouti but you want to have a Plan B, and Somaliland would be a wonderful Plan B," said Tibor Nagy, who led the State Department's Africa diplomacy during the Trump administration.

In November, Mr. Kayd, a U.S. citizen and former neuroscientist at Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital, visited Washington to work the halls of Congress.

The following month, a group of senior U.S. congressional aides visited Berbera and Hargeisa—a deliberate effort by Somaliland's American allies to build momentum on the Hill.

In London, pro-Somaliland lawmakers held a parliamentary debate last month in which they pushed for recognition, but U.K. policy remains that Somalis themselves must decide on any separation.

Somaliland authorities admit they are unlikely to win widespread recognition and a seat in the United Nations soon. Instead, they and their allies in Washington are seeking interim measures that would deepen direct dealings between Somaliland and other governments.

"Instead of recognition, our main goal is engagement," said Mr. Kayd.

Last year, Mr. Risch, the Idaho senator, introduced legislation requiring the Pentagon to study the idea of two-way defense cooperation between the U.S. and Somaliland, bypassing Mogadishu. The amendment didn't pass, but Mr. Risch intended it to start discussions in Washington.

Other Somaliland allies suggest the U.S. could provide aid directly to Somaliland.

"Somalia is an absolute disaster," said Mr. Nagy. "And then you have this little country that's making headway."

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HEADLINE	01/31 New clues on who will develop long Covid
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-new-clues-about-who-will-develop-long-covid-11643625003?mod=hp_trending_now_article_pos3
GIST	<p>Asthma. Unhealthy gut bacteria. The presence of autoantibodies, usually associated with autoimmune conditions.</p> <p>These are among the risk factors identified in new studies as potentially making someone at greater risk of developing long Covid, a condition in which wide-ranging symptoms such as fatigue, brain fog and racing heart rate persist months after an initial Covid-19 infection.</p> <p>The studies help advance scientists' understanding of the biology behind long Covid, and provide clues to potential treatments. Patients with autoantibodies, for instance, might get relief from existing treatments for lupus, an autoimmune disease.</p> <p>The variety of reasons one person might get long Covid and another might not also reinforce scientists' increasing belief that there won't be a single cause or treatment for the condition.</p> <p>"This is really important because we really didn't understand the exact biological risk factors for long Covid," says Linda Geng, co-director of the Stanford Post-Acute Covid-19 Syndrome Clinic, who wasn't involved in any of the studies.</p> <p>In a study published in the journal Cell, scientists identified four risk factors, for which scientists tested upon a patient's initial diagnosis. The most prevalent one was the presence of certain autoantibodies, which are antibodies that mistakenly attack the body in autoimmune conditions such as lupus. Researchers found the autoantibodies in about 60% of the patients who developed long Covid.</p> <p>Most patients didn't have a diagnosed autoimmune disease, but rather had very low levels of autoantibodies associated with various autoimmune diseases, says Jim Heath, senior author on the study</p>

and president and professor of the Institute for Systems Biology, a nonprofit biomedical research organization in Seattle.

A second risk factor was [reactivated Epstein-Barr virus](#). Epstein-Barr is what causes mononucleosis and infects about 90% of people. Normally, the virus remains dormant afterward. The study found that it was reactivated in some people who later developed long Covid.

“Your immune system is probably doing a reasonable job of keeping EBV in check and with a SARS-CoV-2 infection you lose that brake,” says Dr. Heath. “It seems to happen very early in an infection.”

Two other risk factors were Type 2 diabetes and the detection of genetic material from SARS-CoV-2 in the blood, which means the virus escaped the lungs and is spreading to other parts of the body.

The researchers collected and analyzed blood and swab samples from more than 200 Covid-19 patients up to two to three months post-infection. The majority of patients were hospitalized for Covid but the tests were replicated on a separate group of roughly 100 patients with mostly mild Covid-19 infections. The tests were also conducted on about 460 healthy people in a control group.

The researchers are hoping to use their findings to identify [potential treatment options](#) to prevent long Covid. For example, people who have the virus in the blood might be treated with one of the new Covid antiviral drugs.

The researchers also found that some long Covid patients have very depleted levels of the cortisol hormone, resulting in Addison’s disease, which has symptoms such as fatigue and muscle aches. Addison’s patients are often treated with cortisol replacement therapy.

The finding is important because doctors can test and treat the problem with existing therapies, says Claire Steves, a geriatrician and clinical academic at King’s College London, who also studies risk factors for long Covid.

Timothy Henrich, an associate professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, who is also studying long Covid patients, said the Cell study was well done. But he noted that it looked at patients only two to three months after their initial infection.

In a separate new study in Nature Communications, [researchers from Switzerland found five different factors](#) that they concluded will help predict who will develop long Covid.

The most prominent: lower levels of two types of immunoglobulin, IgM and IgG3, which are types of antibodies, says Onur Boyman, senior author of the study and professor and chair of clinical immunology and allergology at the University of Zurich.

Other predictors included being older, a history of asthma, and symptoms of fever, fatigue, cough, difficulty breathing and gastrointestinal issues during an acute Covid-19 infection. People who developed long Covid had on average three of those symptoms during their initial infection.

The researchers looked at 175 Covid-19 patients and compared the findings to about 40 healthy controls. They confirmed the findings in a separate group of 395 Covid-19 patients. Some people had all the risk factors while others had fewer, says Dr. Boyman.

The goal, says Dr. Boyman, was to find indicators in the body that are easy to test for. The two immunoglobulins they identified are fairly stable, he says, and not related to the SARS-CoV-2 infection.

In the third study, published in the journal Gut, researchers in Hong Kong [analyzed the gut microbiome](#) of more than 100 Covid-19 patients at the time of their initial infection, one month later, and again six months later. They compared the results to a control group of 68 healthy people.

The gut microbiome is the bacteria and other microorganisms that live in our digestive tract. Researchers found that Covid-19 patients with healthy gut bacteria were less likely to develop long Covid and had a microbiome similar to people in the healthy control group. Patients who went on to develop long Covid had a less diverse and abundant microbiome.

“It’s an interesting hypothesis that the gut microbiome may be involved in the process of long Covid,” said Dr. Steves, who wasn’t involved in the study. She noted that in general when people are sick their microbiome changes, so more data is needed to see if changing the gut microbiome might work as a treatment.

While promising, the findings in all of the studies need to be tested further in larger groups of people, says Steven Deeks, professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, who wasn’t involved in the studies and is heading a separate study on long Covid.

“When you study a million things in a few people you’re going to find a lot of stuff and not all of it is real,” says Dr. Deeks.

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HEADLINE	02/01 Year later: Myanmar mired in conflict, chaos
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/01/world/asia/myanmar-coup-anniversary-sanctions.html
GIST	<p>In the days after the military in Myanmar seized power on Feb. 1 last year, millions of people took to the streets to oppose the takeover, walking off their jobs in what has become an enduring nationwide civil disobedience movement and resisting the junta’s murderous violence.</p> <p>One year later, the Southeast Asian nation is mired in conflict, the economy is crippled, warfare has spread to every region, and public institutions are in a state of collapse. Peaceful protesters have been gunned down, suspects have been tortured, and thousands of civilians have been killed.</p> <p>The initial daily protests, loud and colorful, have been replaced by an eerie quiet.</p> <p>To mark the anniversary of the coup, protest leaders have called for a “silent strike” on Tuesday, urging people to stay home, close their shops and halt outdoor activity for six hours. The junta circulated leaflets warning that participants would be charged with terrorism, incitement and violating the electronic communications law. Dozens have already been arrested.</p> <p>The regime has engendered such hatred that it has been unable to consolidate control. Hundreds of armed rebel units have sprung up across the country and a shadow National Unity Government — headed in part by ousted elected officials — has formed to help lead opposition to the junta.</p> <p>“Since the early days of the coup, when protests were concentrated in the cities, the conflict has spread to the rest of the country,” said Khu Ree Du, a spokesman for the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force, one of many armed groups fighting the military. “The shape of the conflict will be more intense in the coming year because what the Myanmar military has done is unforgivable.”</p> <p>As part of the coup, the military arrested more than 100 elected officials, including the country’s top civilian leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, 76. She faces as much as 173 years in prison on 17 charges that her supporters say are trumped up. She has been convicted on five counts so far.</p> <p>But Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, the army commander in chief and leader of the coup, appears to have underestimated public contempt for him and his generals, who have responded with a vicious crackdown.</p> <p>Junta forces have killed at least 1,500 civilians who were targeted at peaceful protests or in raids on homes and business, according to the United Nations Human Rights Office. Nearly a fifth of the deaths — at least 290 — occurred while the victims were in custody and often resulted from torture, the Human Rights Office said.</p>

Thousands more civilians have died in remote areas during the military's attacks on towns and villages, at times using heavy weapons, artillery and airstrikes. More than 8,800 opponents of the regime have been imprisoned.

"The Myanmar military has used extreme force and airstrikes in many areas," said Padoh Saw Hla Htun, spokesman for the Karen National Union, another ethnic group seeking autonomy. "They target civilians. Now they are waging war on the whole country and trying to rule the people with fear. The military has turned Myanmar into a failed state within a year."

In a statement on Monday, President Biden denounced the regime's "unspeakable violence against civilians, including children," and its denial of humanitarian access to millions who need lifesaving aid.

Addressing Myanmar's people, Mr. Biden said: "We have not forgotten your struggle. And we will continue to support your valiant determination to bring democracy and the rule of law to your country."

For decades, the military has battled numerous ethnic groups in Myanmar but has never gained complete control over areas on the country's northern periphery. Now, fighting has reached every part of the country, and in some areas, newly formed anti-regime units are fighting alongside armed ethnic groups.

In recent months, the junta has lost control over even more territory, including in Chin and Rakhine states, the Sagaing region and the Magway division. In a recording leaked to local news media, a security minister in the Magway region told junta officials last week that the army had lost control of half a dozen districts in the region. He blamed the rebels' popular support and their effective use of guerrilla tactics.

"As you all know, a government must be able to enforce its authority on the people," said the official, Col. Kyaw Kyaw Lin.

Yanghee Lee, a former United Nations Special Rapporteur on Myanmar, called the military's ouster of the civilian government a failed coup because the regime had not been able to consolidate power. What the country is seeing now, she said, is a "nationwide democratic revolution."

"Min Aung Hlaing tried to seize power over Myanmar on the 1st of February last year," she said. "One year later, he has not succeeded. Why has he failed? Because the people of Myanmar resisted."

With the military attacking civilian targets in the countryside, more than 400,000 people have fled their homes. The international aid group Save the Children reports that at least 150,000 children are among those displaced and that many are living in makeshift shelters in the jungle, where they are vulnerable to hunger and illness.

Human Rights Watch accuses the military of [blocking humanitarian aid to millions](#).

Some of the regime's most brutal attacks have been mounted in Kayah State, where nearly 200,000 people were forced to flee their homes. The capital city, Loikaw, was largely deserted. On Christmas Eve, at least 35 fleeing civilians were [slaughtered by soldiers and burned in their vehicles](#). Among the dead were two Save the Children staff members.

In the weeks after the coup, pro-democracy protesters pleaded for help from the international community. Many carried signs reading, "R2P," or "Responsibility to Protect," referring to a [2005 United Nations doctrine](#) affirming the responsibility of nations to shield populations from egregious crimes.

[But they were soon disappointed.](#)

The United Nations Security Council, which includes Myanmar allies Russia and China, has taken no steps to intervene. And the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which counts Myanmar as a member, has been ineffective in stopping the violence.

Human rights groups have urged the international community to cut the supply of arms reaching the military, eliminate the flow of cash to the regime and end the junta's impunity by prosecuting the generals in the International Criminal Court.

In January, the oil giants Chevron and Total yielded to pressure and [announced plans to withdraw](#) from a natural gas field off the coast of Myanmar, a major source of cash for the regime. But U.S. sanctions on military leaders have not proved to be a significant deterrent.

On Monday, Britain, Canada and the United States added new sanctions against top judicial officials and other individuals helping to supply arms to the junta, including [U Jonathan Kyaw Thaung](#), the scion of a prominent business family.

"How many more people does Myanmar's military have to detain, torture and shoot," said Brad Adams, Asia director of Human Rights Watch, "before influential governments act to cut off the junta from its flow of money and arms?"

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HEADLINE	01/31 US, allies close to reviving Iran nuclear deal?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/31/us/politics/iran-nuclear-deal-biden.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The United States and its European allies appear on the cusp of restoring the deal that limited Iran's nuclear program, Biden administration officials said on Monday, but cautioned that it is now up to the new government in Tehran to decide whether, after months of negotiations, it is willing to dismantle much of its nuclear production equipment in return for sanctions relief.</p> <p>Speaking to reporters in Washington, a senior State Department official signaled that negotiations had reached a point where political leaders needed to decide whether they would agree to key elements of an accord that would essentially return to the 2015 deal that President Donald J. Trump discarded four years ago, over the objections of many of his key advisers. Ultimately, that freed Iran to resume its nuclear production, in some cases enriching nuclear fuel to levels far closer to what is needed to make nuclear weapons.</p> <p>Administration officials cautioned that it was not clear whether a final agreement would be struck, and in Iran that decision is bound to go to the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. And while some remain deeply skeptical that Iran would ultimately agree to the terms now being discussed, the State Department official said that "we can see a path to a deal if those decisions are made and if they are made quickly."</p> <p>"Now is the time for Iran to decide whether it's prepared to make those decisions," the official said. A second senior administration official also said the talks had reached the decision-making stage. Both officials spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the negotiations.</p> <p>For President Biden, restoring the deal — and with it, limits on Iran's production capability — would fulfill a major campaign promise and seal a breach Mr. Trump created with Britain, France, Germany and the European Union, which participated in the original agreement along with Russia and China. But it also comes with significant political risks.</p> <p>No Republican voted for the deal in 2015, and its restoration would almost certainly become a campaign issue in the midterm elections. Like the original deal, the new one would not limit Iran's missile development, the senior official said. It also would not halt Tehran's support for terrorist groups or its proxy forces, which have stirred unrest across the Middle East, as some Democrats and nearly all Republicans have demanded.</p> <p>Despite those shortcomings, Mr. Biden is prepared to return to the 2015 agreement and "to make the political decisions necessary to achieve that goal," the senior State Department official said.</p>

And while American officials offered no details, a clean restoration of the old accord would mean all limits on Iran's production of nuclear material would still expire in 2030. Last year, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken vowed that after restoring the old accord, the United States would seek one that was "longer and stronger." But Iranian officials rejected that idea.

The State Department official said that the negotiations to restore the 2015 agreement were "in a final stretch" and that "all sides" needed to commit to returning to full compliance. In fact, the United States violated the original accord first, when it withdrew and reimposed sanctions against Iran. Mr. Trump then added hundreds of additional sanctions, and it is unclear how the negotiation now underway would deal with those.

In Iran, Ali Akbar Salehi, the former head of the country's Atomic Energy Organization and a key player in the original negotiations, told an energy conference that "it appears that the nuclear negotiations will reach the end result that we have in mind," according to Iranian news reports.

After nearly two years of trying to persuade European leaders to counter the American sanctions, Iran began violating the agreement, denying inspectors access to key facilities and ramping up its nuclear enrichment.

While it has not amassed the same volume of enriched uranium as it held before the 2015 agreement, it has purified some of its new stockpile to a level of 60 percent — closer to the 90 percent enrichment used to produce nuclear weapons. Previously, Iran had capped its enrichment at 20 percent.

"A country enriching at 60 percent is a very serious thing," Rafael Grossi, the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations body that inspects Iran's production facilities and verifies compliance with agreements. "Only countries making bombs are reaching this level."

Iran had been resistant to eliminating that 60 percent-enriched fuel. It is unclear how it would be disposed of, or whether it would just be moved to another country, perhaps Russia, which took Iran's previous stockpile.

When Mr. Trump exited the original agreement in 2018 — which he called "the worst deal ever" — he promised to force Tehran into new negotiations, saying he would get better terms and also halt the country's support for the Syrian regime, its funding of terrorist groups and its missile tests. But he never got them back to the negotiating table.

Instead, Iran doubled down on its nuclear and military activities in the region, and evaded sanctions by smuggling oil to key buyers — including China — to keep its economy afloat as it waited for the Trump administration to leave office.

The new government of President Ebrahim Raisi was dismissive of its predecessors, charging that they had failed to get sanctions lifted even after Iran shipped 97 percent of its nuclear fuel out of the country. And for months it left American negotiators — whom it has refused to meet directly — dangling, uncertain whether the new leadership would even attempt to reconstitute the old arrangement. Over time, though, economic pressures on Iran built.

Still, returning to the accord is sure to anger hard-liners in Iran who have warned that the United States could renege again when Mr. Biden is no longer president. They sought a written assurance that the United States would never leave the arrangement, something Mr. Biden said he could not provide.

Mr. Biden's biggest political vulnerability now may be that in restoring the old arrangement, he buys an eight-year reprieve at best.

“You arrest the advance of the of the program; you buy time to deal with what is a problem that is being deferred,” said Dennis B. Ross, a longtime Middle East negotiator who oversaw Iran policy at the White House during the Obama administration. “It’s not going away — it’s being deferred.”

However, Mr. Ross said, the deal helps stave off a nuclear arms race in the region.

One key issue is how Israel will respond. It has continued its sabotage campaign against Iran’s facilities, blowing up some of them and, at the end of the Trump administration, assassinating the scientist who led what American and Israeli intelligence believe was Iran’s bomb-design project. But no intelligence agency has provided public evidence that the project has resumed in a significant way since it was suspended in 2003.

The U.S. and Iran also appear to be close to reaching a prisoner swap deal to free four American citizens in exchange for Iranians sentenced for sanctions violations, according to two people familiar with the talks. The senior State Department official said that he could not envision a deal with Iran if Americans were not released, and Iran’s foreign ministry subsequently said it would be open to a prisoner exchange with the U.S.

On Monday, ardent critics of the 2015 deal — and by extension the return to it — vowed to overturn it when a Republican president returns to the White House.

“Any nuclear deal will allow Iran to take patient pathways to nuclear weapons as key restrictions expire and tens of billions of dollars flow into the coffers of the regime to finance its destructive activities,” said Mark Dubowitz, the chief executive of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a Washington think tank, who worked with several administrations on Iran policy.

“When power shifts in Washington, Republicans again will reimpose all the sanctions and take America out of what they see as a fatally flawed agreement,” he said.

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HEADLINE	01/31 US designates Qatar ‘major non-NATO ally’
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/31/us/politics/biden-qatar-nato.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — President Biden on Monday named Qatar as a “major non-NATO ally” of the United States, a designation that clears the way for greater security cooperation and investment in the Gulf nation at a time when Mr. Biden is seeking help boosting natural gas supplies in Europe.</p> <p>The president is eager to reassure European nations that they will not suffer natural gas shortages if a war between Ukraine and Russia breaks out in the weeks ahead. Russia is one of the largest suppliers of natural gas to Germany and other countries in western Europe.</p> <p>Mr. Biden informed reporters of the planned designation on Monday before a meeting at the White House with Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, the emir of Qatar. The president praised the relationship between the two countries over the past half-century on issues like Afghanistan, the dispute between Israel and the Palestinians, and the fight against the Islamic State.</p> <p>“I am notifying Congress that I will designate Qatar as a major non-NATO ally to reflect the importance of our relationship,” Mr. Biden said. “I think it’s long overdue.”</p> <p>Only 17 other countries have been granted that status by American presidents. They include Australia, Egypt, Israel, Japan, South Korea, Jordan, New Zealand, Thailand, Kuwait, Morocco, Pakistan, Bahrain, Philippines, Argentina, Afghanistan and Tunisia. Former President Donald Trump conferred the status on Brazil in 2019.</p>

Conferring the status of “major non-NATO ally” on a country does not guarantee that the United States will come to the defense of that country in the event of an attack. That guarantee — laid out in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s founding treaty — is limited to full members of the alliance.

But the designation gives Qatar more diplomatic prestige and access to technology, security systems and training by U.S. defense forces that has not been previously available to it. The move is often used to prod countries toward closer ties with the United States and other Western nations.

Mr. Biden formally notified leaders in Congress of the designation in a letter, just hours after his statement to reporters.

“I am making this designation in recognition of Qatar’s many years of contributions to U.S.-led efforts in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility and in recognition of our own national interest in deepening bilateral defense and security cooperation with the State of Qatar,” Mr. Biden wrote.

The looming conflict between Russia and Ukraine is the immediate concern for Mr. Biden, who is seeking to maintain unity with America’s European allies behind threats of sanctions on Russia if President Vladimir V. Putin decides to invade.

Concerns about the possibility that Russia might restrict the flow of natural gas to Europe could undermine that unity, and White House officials have said they are working with other nations around the world to provide reassurances to European leaders if that should come to pass.

In a readout of Mr. Biden’s meeting with the emir Monday evening, the White House did not specifically reference the Ukraine situation.

“Together, they reaffirmed their mutual interest in promoting security and prosperity in the Gulf and broader Middle East region, ensuring the stability of global energy supplies, supporting the people of Afghanistan, and strengthening commercial and investment cooperation,” the readout said.

In the case of Qatar, Mr. Biden is also hoping to deepen economic and security ties. In his remarks on Monday, the president applauded an announcement by the chief executive of Qatar Airways of a \$34 billion deal to purchase planes from Boeing. Mr. Biden said the deal would support tens of thousands of jobs in the United States.

Under terms of the deal announced Monday, Qatar Airways will purchase a new super cargo plane from Boeing, the 777-8 freighter. Stan Deal, the C.E.O. of Boeing Commercial Airplanes, said in an announcement at the White House that “Qatar Airways’ selection of the efficient 777-8 freighter is a testament to our commitment to provide freighters with market-leading capacity, reliability and efficiency.”

Akbar Al Baker, chief executive of the Qatar Airways Group, called it the launch of “the most significant new freighter aircraft for a generation.”

White House officials called the deal between the two companies one of the largest in Boeing’s history and said it would benefit Americans by supporting tens of thousands of jobs at Boeing and its affiliated companies.

Brian Deese, the director of Mr. Biden’s National Economic Council, said in a tweet that the deal could be one of the largest exports of the year from the United States, and boasted about the ways that the deal could help the American economy.

“In short, this deal boosts America’s civil aviation industry, promoting greater domestic production capacity, a healthy hybrid commercial-defense industrial base and strong supply chains, while uplifting the hundreds of small businesses that feed into Boeing’s supply chains,” he wrote.

HEADLINE	01/31 Rush for slice of paradise in Puerto Rico
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/31/us/puerto-rico-gentrification.html
GIST	<p>RINCÓN, P.R. — The last time strangers approached Samuel Sánchez Tirado while he was trimming his front lawn, he pretended to be the landscaper so that they would leave him alone. He knew what the uninvited visitors wanted, and he was tired of having the same conversation over and over again.</p> <p>Mr. Sánchez lives in Rincón, a seaside town in northwestern Puerto Rico famous for surfing and sunsets that has become a hot spot for wealthy investors looking for tax breaks. The visitors, like so many before them, were interested in buying his one-story home, which is a two-minute walk from the beach. It is not for sale, but that has not stopped the unsolicited offers from coming.</p> <p>“They don’t ask you for a price,” he said. “They just hand you a check and tell you to fill it out with whatever you think the house is worth.”</p> <p>These are boom times for investors flocking to idyllic towns all over Puerto Rico, some of them seeking to take advantage of tax incentives intended to attract new people and outside money to the cash-strapped island, which is working its way out of bankruptcy. The tax breaks’ appeal accelerated after the coronavirus pandemic prompted many companies to shift to remote work, inspiring Americans who live on the mainland to move to more temperate climes.</p> <p>But the influx of the affluent new settlers, who must acquire residency and buy property in Puerto Rico within two years of moving in order to keep the tax breaks, has pushed up home prices and displaced residents who can no longer afford to live in their hometowns. Hurricane Maria, which heavily damaged thousands of homes in 2017, had already prompted many residents to leave the island.</p> <p>The real estate boom, which began in San Juan, the capital, has extended across the island, as investors have started to move away from the metropolitan area and into smaller towns like Rincón.</p> <p>There are new arrivals beyond those seeking tax breaks who are also snapping up properties and driving up rents and home prices. But it is the finance and tech investors who have formally applied for tax-break status who have drawn the most attention.</p> <p>Many of them are cryptocurrency traders, who now hold weekly happy hours at a seaside bar in Rincón. A new barbecue food truck that opened in August accepts Bitcoin, Ethereum, Cardano, Shiba Inu, Solana and Litecoin for its mainland-style chicken.</p> <p>The creeping gentrification troubles many Puerto Ricans, who have become increasingly more forceful in questioning how an economy reliant on tax breaks for the wealthy can work for local residents increasingly unable to afford property.</p> <p>“It feels like Hurricane Maria placed a ‘For Sale’ sign on the island,” said Gloria Cuevas Viera, a Rincón resident who is helping to lead the fight against gentrification.</p> <p>Many investors buy residential properties and then resell them at higher prices or turn them into short-term vacation rentals, turning entire neighborhoods into Airbnb corridors and creating a shortage of inventory for local residents. Forty-three percent of Puerto Ricans live under the federal poverty level.</p> <p>Israel Matos, 45, will have to move out of his Rincón home by March because the property owner sold it last year. Mr. Matos had an option to buy the house but it expired. The owner, who is from Hermosa Beach, Calif., decided to sell to someone else.</p> <p>Mr. Matos has lived in the home with his wife and two daughters for two years, and said he cannot find a single listing in Rincón that matches his budget.</p>

“The pressure as a father is incredibly difficult,” said Mr. Matos, a sound engineer for a television station. “I never thought I would be in the situation of having a hard time looking for a roof to live under with my daughters. And it’s all because I don’t have \$100,000 in the bank.”

Recently, [dozens of demonstrators gathered in Old San Juan](#) to protest the tax breaks. They congregated in front of a former children’s museum that the Bitcoin billionaire Brock Pierce has [turned into a “crypto clubhouse.”](#) Protesters [graffitied the building](#) with “Brock Pierce is a colonizer” and “Gringo go home.”

The tax breaks fall under a law known as Act 60, a version of which was initially enacted by the Puerto Rico government under another name in 2012, as the island faced a looming economic collapse. The incentive [drew more interest after 2017](#), when Hurricane Maria decimated the island. In 2019, the tax breaks were repackaged to attract finance, tech and other investors.

People who move to the island can benefit from a reduction of income taxes on long-term capital gains, dividends, interest and revenues from their services. In Silicon Valley, [a billboard advertises Puerto Rico](#) as “a tech hub in sync with your vision.”

As of October, Puerto Rico had received 1,349 applications in 2021 — a record — from people looking to become resident investors. Of those, 982 had been approved. In all, more than 4,286 applications have been approved since 2012, with more than 35 percent of them approved in the last three years.

Under the law, an investor can qualify for the tax breaks if he or she has not been a resident of Puerto Rico for at least 10 years prior. The investor must also buy a home to benefit from a 4 percent corporate tax rate and zero capital gains tax. The more than three million Puerto Ricans already living on the island do not qualify for the tax breaks.

“This is creating inequality in terms of taxpayer responsibility,” said Heriberto Martínez Otero, the executive director of the Ways and Means Committee in the Puerto Rico House of Representatives.

Renters forced out by soaring housing prices along the coast may move to cheaper neighboring towns but may have to spend more on gas and tolls to commute, said Mr. Martínez Otero, who also teaches economics at the University of Puerto Rico.

Owners who sell their homes, of course, have benefited from a rise in property prices, and Gov. Pedro R. Pierluisi has applauded the fact that many investors are buying luxury homes — a collapse in the luxury real estate market was a key motivation for passing the tax law, he said in January.

“What was intended was an influx of people with capital to give life to the real estate market,” he said.

Large numbers of people leaving the island had also been a concern for policymakers. Hammered by both the economic crisis and Hurricane Maria, the island’s population declined 11.8 percent from 2010 to 2020, according to the census.

“But the fact that there are people buying residential properties that do not meet the reality of consumption patterns in Puerto Rico joins the rest of the problems on the island that hinders affordable housing,” Mr. Martínez Otero said.

Mr. Sánchez, the Rincón homeowner who pretended to be a landscaper, helps coordinate the town’s federal Section 8 program, which provides affordable housing to low-income families. The program offers families monthly \$450 vouchers to pay for housing, but he is struggling to find homes at that price.

“I’m worried that native Puerto Ricans won’t be able to live or invest here and will end up displaced,” he said. “I thought the prices were only going up in the downtown area, but the properties in the more rural sectors in the mountains are getting expensive.”

In Rincón, Ingrid Badillo Carrero, a real estate broker, said home prices have soared in the last four years. In 2017, a two-bedroom condo would list at an average of \$290,000. Now, the same unit could be listed at about \$420,000.

The average annual income in Rincón is about \$19,900.

“I’ve had locals tell me I’m selling our country,” said Ms. Badillo, who regularly deals with investor clients seeking the tax breaks. Many are able to pay in cash, which is more attractive to sellers than selling to Puerto Ricans, who may only have the means to pay through a mortgage.

In May, Elizabeth Stevenson moved to Puerto Rico with her husband, Tyler McNatt, from Austin, Texas. They were looking for a way out of going to the office every day and began exploring cryptocurrency investments as a way to generate income. Ms. Stevenson, an Act 60 beneficiary, is working as a consultant for a California movie producer now based in Puerto Rico, while also buying and selling cryptocurrency.

“It’s really exciting that there’s so much to learn, and there’s so much money to be made,” said Ms. Stevenson, who signed a one-year lease for an apartment about a 15-minute walk from the beach.

She is part of several crypto groups for ex-mainlanders that regularly host events in Rincón. Daniel Torgerson, a crypto investor who moved to Puerto Rico in June, convenes a weekly happy hour at the Aqua Marina Beach Club in Rincón.

In early January, about 20 people met around the bar and pool, speaking under string lights and competing with the sounds of the nocturnal coquí frogs.

“How’s everyone feeling in the market this week?” Mr. Torgerson asked the crowd. “Any new projects you’re excited about?”

“Solar bitcoin mining!” someone responded.

The new residents are bringing their children along. Myriam Pérez Cruz, the principal at Manuel González Melo K-8 School in Rincón, said the school had to add more coursework for students learning Spanish as their second language.

In the 2016-17 school year, a student survey identified three native English speakers who needed Spanish-language assistance, Ms. Pérez said. For the 2021-22 school year, that number rose to 17 students.

Mr. Matos, the Rincón resident who must move out of his home by March, recently drove around looking for promising “For Rent” signs. Afterward, he went to the beach, sat cross-legged on the sand, and tried to relax. But soon after parking his car, he felt uneasy.

“There were probably 50 people on that beach, and I only saw what looked like five Puerto Ricans there,” Mr. Matos said. “Rincón has changed a lot.”

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HEADLINE	01/31 Lockdowns little or no impact Covid deaths
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/31/lockdowns-had-little-or-no-impact-covid-19-deaths/
GIST	<p>Lockdowns in the U.S. and Europe had little or no impact in reducing deaths from COVID-19, according to a new analysis by researchers at Johns Hopkins University.</p> <p>The lockdowns during the early phase of the pandemic in 2020 reduced COVID-19 mortality by about 0.2%, found the broad review of multiple scientific studies.</p>

“We find no evidence that lockdowns, school closures, border closures, and limiting gatherings have had a noticeable effect on COVID-19 mortality,” the researchers wrote.

But the research paper said lockdowns did have “devastating effects” on the economy and contributed to numerous social ills.

“They have contributed to reducing economic activity, raising unemployment, reducing schooling, causing political unrest, contributing to domestic violence, and undermining liberal democracy,” the report said.

“Such a standard benefit-cost calculation leads to a strong conclusion: lockdowns should be rejected out of hand as a pandemic policy instrument,” the paper concluded.

Early on, many states and 186 countries imposed bans on work, socialization, in-person schooling, travel and other restrictions to limit the spread of the disease, citing recommendations by top health care experts.

Researchers at the Imperial College London, for example, predicted that such steps could reduce death rates by up to 98%.

That never happened, according to the new study by researchers Steve Hanke, Jonas Herby, and Lars Jonung at Johns Hopkins.

“Overall, we conclude that lockdowns are not an effective way of reducing mortality rates during a pandemic, at least not during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic,” they wrote.

They examined deaths early during the pandemic and determined that, by end of the lockdown period studied, on May 20, 2020, a total of 97,081 people had died of COVID-19 in the U.S.

A prominent study at the time had estimated there would be 99,050 deaths without lockdowns.

Mr. Hanke is the founder and co-director of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Applied Economics, Global Health, and the Study of Business Enterprise. Mr. Herby is special adviser at Center for Political Studies in Copenhagen, Denmark. Mr. Jonung is professor emeritus in economics at Lund University, Sweden.

They conducted a “meta-analysis” of dozens of studies that examined COVID-19 mortality rates.

Despite the overall findings, they did note some evidence that closing bars helped to reduce deaths.

“Closing nonessential businesses seems to have had some effect (reducing COVID-19 mortality by 10.6%), which is likely to be related to the closure of bars,” they said.

The researchers said the timing of lockdowns, and unintended consequences, may play a larger role than expected in affecting mortality.

“Lockdowns have limited peoples’ access to safe (outdoor) places such as beaches, parks, and zoos, or included outdoor mask mandates or strict outdoor gathering restrictions, pushing people to meet at less safe (indoor) places,” they wrote. “Indeed, we do find some evidence that limiting gatherings was counterproductive and increased COVID-19 mortality.”

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HEADLINE	01/31 China zero-Covid strategy before Olympics
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/31/china-leans-zero-covid-strategy-olympics-lockdowns/
GIST	Sudden lockdowns that trap whole neighborhoods in their homes. A testing regimen that requires millions to get swabbed in a single weekend. And a bizarre request for Hong Kong pet lovers to turn in their hamsters after a mini-outbreak at a pet store.

Bucking the approach in much of the rest of the world, China is deploying a “zero-COVID” approach to the pandemic that reflects Beijing’s authoritarian instincts but may be unsustainable.

Ordinary citizens — and entire megacities — suffer from the hardships of constant virus surveillance and quarantining. At the same time, scientists wonder whether the Chinese will have enough natural immunity and antibodies from domestic vaccines to keep up with variants that have repeatedly spun off from the coronavirus discovered in Wuhan two years ago.

Although Europe and the U.S. have reported higher death totals than China, Western nations have learned hard lessons about living with the virus as nations consider a pivot to an endemic phase in which COVID-19 is managed as another respiratory disease.

China’s draconian policy is under a global microscope as its communist leaders prepare to stage the Winter Olympic Games in Beijing starting Friday while trying to prevent any major outbreaks of the highly contagious omicron variant.

“The zero COVID policy has never made sense, and the Chinese clinging to it in the midst of omicron will be futile,” said Amesh Adalja, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security. “Zero-COVID is not a sustainable approach to a virus that was always destined for endemicity and could potentially be dangerous as it may have left a zero-COVID country’s population with little immunity and no ability to risk-calculate.”

He said “it is not surprising that such a policy is still in place in an authoritarian communist country in which the population is used to such measures.”

Beijing is shutting down housing complexes as COVID-19 pops up in greater numbers on the cusp of the Olympics while athletes, workers and journalists will be completely cut off from the local population for the two-week extravaganza.

Authorities detected more than 20 cases of COVID-19 over the weekend, bringing the total infections from its latest outbreak to over 100, according to the South China Morning Post.

Residents within housing compounds in the Fengtai and Anzhenli neighborhoods of Beijing’s Chaoyang district are not allowed to leave their homes. They will be tested daily after the recent uptick in local cases.

The Xiong’an New Area, home to 1.2 million people southwest of Beijing, was quietly locked down a few days ago, raising eyebrows about the extent authorities will go to try to stiff-arm the virus.

Reported COVID-19 case totals would be enviable elsewhere in the world, but China’s government has shown no tolerance for any cases since the start of the pandemic. It imposed the first set of lockdowns on Wuhan in January 2020 and stuck to the model as other countries used lighter economic restrictions or moved on to hoping vaccines, treatments and masking would keep the virus in check.

A woman identified as Ms. Wang posted on the Chinese social media giant WeChat this month that she went on a blind date and got stuck at the man’s house because his community in Zhengzhou went into a sudden lockdown. It was unclear how many days she spent there, but he was reportedly a good cook.

Other accounts have been heart-wrenching, including videos that show children entering hospital isolation without their parents.

Xian, a city of 13 million known for its ancient Terracotta Army sculptures, recently started to lift strict COVID-19 restrictions that were in place for three weeks.

An account on the Chinese social media platform Weibo reported on a pregnant woman who miscarried outside a hospital after she was refused entry because she didn’t present a virus test. The report generated

outrage over the severe restrictions. Officials apologized for negligence at the hospital and blamed an “insufficient” emergency plan for triaging patients, according to NBC News.

Hong Kong, meanwhile, recently allowed pet shops to begin selling hamsters and other small animals after a campaign to cull over 2,000 of the pets because of a small outbreak of the virus at one shop. Outsiders were outraged and offered to adopt the pets.

“The reporting from China is very limited, but you get these fragmentary reports [that] the population is getting restive and very concerned,” said William Schaffner, an infectious disease expert at Vanderbilt University. “How long can they sustain this, not only from a public health perspective but from a social, political and economic perspective? They’re hanging in so far.”

Vaccine questions

China has administered 1.27 billion doses of its home-developed vaccines, resulting in 85% of the population becoming fully vaccinated, according to Our World in Data, an online tracker. But studies suggest Sinovac, a prominent Chinese vaccine that uses an inactivated virus, is not very effective against omicron, raising questions about the country’s ability to stiff-arm the fast-moving variant for posterity.

Former Food and Drug Commissioner Scott Gottlieb told CNBC this month that Chinese authorities were playing a futile game of whack-a-mole in trying to snuff out and contain even the most minor outbreaks. Unlike in other major countries, China’s population isn’t building up the natural defenses needed to curb COVID-19 in the long run.

“Outside of Wuhan, the prevalence is very low, so there is not a lot of immunity in the population,” Mr. Gottlieb said. “And they’ve deployed vaccines that have been far less effective against omicron.”

Beijing’s most pressing priority is holding a virus-free Olympics, where athletes, workers and journalists will be cut off from the rest of the city.

The process starts at the airport and includes high-speed rail to get participants to venues. In short, no one outside the bubble gets in and no one inside the bubble can exit.

The South China Morning Post said organizers detected 37 infections among athletes at the airport or the Olympics’ home base, or “bubble,” over the weekend, bringing the total to 176 since Jan. 23. The infections raised questions about whether the closed system will work or whether it will protect locals but not those inside the bubble.

Beijing limited tickets to domestic spectators and in January further restricted audiences to those who were invited to be on-site. In one sign of the drastic measures, authorities told locals not to help anyone in a car accident within Olympics-only lanes of highways.

Athletes will be tested daily with sensitive PCR tests, which can detect remnants of the virus after a person is no longer infectious, raising questions about whether some competitors will be frozen out of the competition for no good reason.

In an extension of the stifling atmosphere, authorities told foreign athletes not to protest its treatment of ethnic minorities. Officials recently said athletes who protest could be “subject to certain punishment.”

Asked about potential threats, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Monday, “I think we spoke to this last summer and conveyed a support for freedom of speech for individuals.”

The Biden administration has announced a diplomatic boycott of the Games, allowing American athletes to compete but sending no official government representatives to watch them. A handful of other countries, including Britain, Canada and Australia, have followed suit.

	<p>China's nationalistic state media, meanwhile, argue that criticism of its approach to the Olympics and virus control reflects a "sour grapes" mentality in the West, which has struggled with far higher death totals during a pandemic that originated in China.</p> <p>"Slander against China's dynamic zero-COVID policy from some countries in the West, especially the U.S., is unconvincing," a Global Times opinion piece said Monday. "In the face of the pandemic, some countries in the West have already laid down arms, and are unqualified in assigning blame and pointing fingers at China regarding China's rational anti-epidemic efforts, which actually have been proven to be more effective in curbing the spread of the virus."</p> <p>After the Olympics, Chinese authorities will have to consider how and when to relax border controls and limits on movement throughout the country, particularly if the virus finds a way to attack cities that haven't had much prior infection.</p> <p>"I guess that's the question — could there be in China waves of infection that come later than the rest of the world simply because they've been delayed and this virus will not be denied?" Dr. Schaffner said. "The impact will be not only on the Chinese population but the rest of the world because they could be variant generators."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 US, UK, Canada: new Myanmar sanctions
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-issues-myanmar-related-sanctions-treasury-website-2022-01-31/
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON, Jan 31 (Reuters) - The United States, Britain and Canada on Monday imposed sanctions against officials in Myanmar, in measures timed to mark one year since the military seized power and plunged the country into chaos.</p> <p>A joint action by the three nations, who have all already imposed sanctions on Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing and other members of the junta, targeted judicial officials involved in prosecutions against deposed Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.</p> <p>Washington also slapped sanctions on a directorate responsible for buying weapons for the junta from overseas, an alleged arms dealer and a company it said provides financial support to the junta.</p> <p>The military have detained Suu Kyi and members of her National League for Democracy (NLD) party since the Feb. 1, 2021, coup. The military complained of fraud in a November 2020 election that the NLD won by a landslide. Monitors said the vote reflected the will of the country's people.</p> <p>Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the coordinated action demonstrated international support for Myanmar's people and would "further promote accountability for the coup and the violence perpetrated by the regime," citing nearly 1,500 people killed and 10,000 detained by a military seeking to consolidate control.</p> <p>JUDICIAL OFFICIALS TARGETED</p> <p>The Treasury said it added a total of seven individuals and two entities to its sanctions list on Monday. They included the junta's attorney general, Thida Oo, whose office it said had crafted politically motivated charges against Suu Kyi.</p> <p>Suu Kyi is on trial in more than a dozen cases and has so far been sentenced to a combined six years in detention. She denies all charges.</p> <p>The Treasury also listed the Myanmar Supreme Court's chief justice and the chairman of the Anti-Corruption Commission, who it said were also involved in the prosecution of Suu Kyi and NLD leaders. The action freezes any U.S. assets of those blacklisted and generally bars Americans from dealing with them.</p>

	<p>Canada announced it was adding the same three judicial officials to its sanctions list. Britain listed the attorney general and corruption commission chair as well as the junta-appointed chair of Myanmar's election commission, according to a statement from the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office.</p> <p>Washington also added a Myanmar army directorate responsible for buying arms from overseas; an alleged arms dealer, Tay Za, and his two adult sons; and KT Services & Logistics Company Limited and its CEO, Jonathan Myo Kyaw Thaung.</p> <p>That company, which Treasury said leases a port in Yangon from a military-owned company for \$3 million a year, is part of KT Group, a conglomerate that has done business with companies from Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Iran moves centrifuge parts production
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-moves-centrifuge-parts-production-karaj-isfahan-iaea-says-2022-01-31/
GIST	<p>VIENNA, Jan 31 (Reuters) - Iran has moved production of parts for advanced centrifuges, used to enrich uranium, out of a workshop only a month after agreeing to allow the U.N. nuclear watchdog to reinstall surveillance cameras there, the watchdog said on Monday.</p> <p>The move adds to uncertainty over Iran's nuclear activities while indirect talks between Tehran and Washington on saving the 2015 Iran nuclear deal are at a delicate stage. Western powers say there are only weeks left before Iran's atomic advances have hollowed out the deal completely.</p> <p>The workshop at the TESA Karaj complex was the victim of apparent sabotage in June that Iran blamed on its arch-foe Israel, which declined to comment.</p> <p>One of the International Atomic Energy Agency's four surveillance cameras at Karaj was destroyed in the apparent attack. Iran removed all four after the incident and the destroyed camera's footage is still missing. Western powers and the IAEA have demanded that Iran locate it.</p> <p>After a months-long standoff that threatened to scupper the wider nuclear talks, Iran agreed to let the IAEA re-install its cameras there last month.</p> <p>"On 19 January 2022, Iran informed the Agency that it intended to produce centrifuge rotor tubes and bellows at a new location in Esfahan, instead of at the centrifuge component production workshop at the TESA Karaj complex, and that the Agency could adjust its surveillance and monitoring measures accordingly," a confidential IAEA report seen by Reuters said.</p> <p>The IAEA issued a statement summarising the report's contents. Both said the IAEA placed seals on machines at Karaj and removed its cameras there, adding that production at Karaj had "ceased".</p> <p>With the IAEA having been kept away from Karaj for so long and camera footage remaining with Iran for the time being, it is unclear what exactly happened at Karaj after the incident and whether equipment that could potentially be used to make nuclear weapons was secretly siphoned off, diplomats say.</p> <p>Iran says it wants nuclear technology only for civil uses.</p> <p>IAEA inspectors installed surveillance cameras at the workshop in the city of Isfahan on Jan. 24, the IAEA said, adding: "As of the same date, the production of centrifuge rotor tubes and bellows at this new workshop had yet to commence."</p> <p>The report did not say why Iran had moved production to Isfahan from Karaj, or how the two workshops compare.</p>

HEADLINE	01/31 Kurdish forces: 121 died Syria prison clash
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/kurdish-led-forces-says-121-died-during-syria-prison-clash-with-islamic-state-2022-01-31/
GIST	<p>BEIRUT, Jan 31 (Reuters) - The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces said on Monday 40 of their troops, 77 prison guards, and four civilians have died since the start of clashes with Islamic State militants who attacked a jail on Jan. 20 in a bid to free members.</p> <p>The Syrian Democratic Forces said it regained full control of al-Sina'a prison in the northeastern Syrian city of Hasaka on Wednesday and all remaining Islamic State militants surrendered.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 DOH: 1,339,743 cases, 10,776 deaths
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article257902693.html
GIST	<p>The Washington state Department of Health reported 9,156 new COVID-19 cases Monday.</p> <p>As of Monday, the state's preliminary death tally was 10,776. That number is up by 77 since Friday. The confirmed death tally as of Jan. 14 was 10,452.</p> <p>The statewide case total from the illness caused by the coronavirus stood at 1,339,743 cases on Monday. The state logged 19,776 new cases on Saturday and 17,148 new cases on Sunday.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 AG lawsuit: Covid testing firm faked results
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/covid-testing-company-faked-test-results-lied-to-patients-wa-ag-lawsuit-says/
GIST	<p>An Illinois-based coronavirus testing company with at least 13 sites in Washington, faked or delayed test results (or provided none at all), lied to patients and failed to properly store test samples, according to a lawsuit filed Monday by Washington state Attorney General Bob Ferguson.</p> <p>The lawsuit, filed in King County Superior Court, describes how the company, Center for COVID Control, expanded to about 300 U.S. locations and allegedly took advantage of residents at a time when frequent testing was in high demand as a "critical tool in the fight against COVID-19."</p> <p>"Center for COVID Control contributed to the spread of COVID-19 when it provided false negative results," Ferguson said in a statement. "These sham testing centers threatened the health and safety of our communities. They must be held accountable."</p> <p>The suit also alleges the Center for COVID Control stored tests in garbage bags for more than a week, rather than properly refrigerating them; backdated sample-collection dates so stale samples would still be processed; and instructed its employees to "lie to patients on a daily basis" when Washingtonians asked about delayed results.</p> <p>Ferguson also named Akbar Syed, Aleya Siyaj and Doctors Clinical Laboratory in the lawsuit.</p> <p>Syed and Siyaj, who are married, co-founded the testing company and live in Illinois, according to the suit. Doctors Clinical Laboratory is also based in Illinois and tests samples collected in Washington, though it's not registered with the Washington Secretary of State's Office, the suit says.</p> <p>The Center for COVID Control did not respond to a request for comment Monday.</p>

The company had been operating in Washington since October and its services had begun increasing in popularity particularly after the rapid spread of the omicron variant prompted a rise in demand for tests and forced health care systems to start limiting appointments.

Locations in Seattle, Bellevue, Tacoma, Lakewood, University Place, Auburn, Lynnwood, Everett, Port Orchard and Yakima promised free test results within 15 minutes for a rapid test and within 48 hours for a more sensitive PCR test.

For several weeks, however, [customers throughout the country have been complaining](#) about delayed or missing test results, leading health authorities in several states, including California and Illinois, to launch investigations into the company.

In Lakewood, city officials issued a stop-work order at the company's site in mid-January after receiving complaints and finding it was operating without a business license, "among other concerns," [Lakewood city officials said](#).

According to Ferguson's office, the company didn't have a license to operate a business anywhere in Washington except Yakima.

Ferguson's office plans to file a motion for preliminary injunction "soon," the statement said.

The company had halted operations earlier this month, citing an "unprecedented recent demand for testing," but said it planned to reopen once "additional staff" had been trained.

One former Illinois-based employee of the Center for COVID Control reported to Ferguson's office that they quit after seeing that "trash bags of tests piled up and (their) team was instructed to lie to patients on a daily basis," the statement said.

As the company fell further behind on processing samples, the statement said, they were "flooded" with calls asking about results — leading to hourslong wait times. Employees were then told to tell patients to expect results in 24 hours, even if there was no information about the particular sample, or that their results were inconclusive, which would require the patient to get another test.

As of Monday, the company had also billed the federal government \$124 million for tests for "uninsured" patients, the statement said.

"The company frequently marked patients as 'uninsured,' even if they were insured," Ferguson's office said. "Employees were instructed to mark patients as 'uninsured' if the patient didn't provide their insurance information by the time of testing or if their insurance company wasn't listed on the company's data entry form."

Regulation of coronavirus testing sites in Washington remains a bit muddled. Earlier this month, Public Health — Seattle & King County said in a statement that while it was aware of complaints against the Center for COVID Control sites in the county, local public health agencies didn't have "regulatory authority." The department instead said it would forward complaints to the state Department of Health and Ferguson's office.

Brionna Aho, spokesperson for the attorney general's office, said Monday that jurisdiction depends on the "exact nature of the issue(s)."

"The safest bet if people have concerns is to file complaints with our office, DOH and the Office of the Inspector General," Aho wrote in an email.

Barbara Barronian, 68, felt uneasy about the Center for COVID Control after visiting its University Place site at the end of November, she said on Monday.

Return to Top	<p>She had tested negative with an at-home test, but was feeling sick and wanted to get tested again.</p> <p>“I Googled ‘COVID test sites near me’ and that one was just about a mile up the street,” Barronian said. “It was one of the first that popped up ... and didn’t require appointments.”</p> <p>When she arrived, however, the place “seemed a little sketchy,” she said.</p> <p>“It was an empty storefront and there was a banner posted on the window, but it didn’t identify the name of the company,” Barronian said. “... Inside, it was empty except for a folding table with some supplies on it and two chairs.”</p> <p>Barronian said she was also surprised that when she asked the site worker how she should declare her Medicare coverage, she was told her to write “no insurance.”</p> <p>Barronian requested both a rapid and PCR test. Her rapid test result came back within 15 minutes — she was told it was negative. But nearly two months later, she has yet to get her PCR test results, even though she’s made several calls to the company and visited the University Place site again looking for answers.</p> <p>“At best, they seemed incompetent,” she said. “But they’re putting the public at jeopardy, having all of us walking around infecting each other.”</p> <p>The lawsuit asks the court to order the Center for COVID Control to pay civil penalties of up to \$12,500 per violation of the Consumer Protection Act and relinquish any profits the company made from its “unlawful conduct,” in addition to closing all locations.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 FAA approval clears flights from Paine Field
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/boeing-aerospace/faa-approval-will-end-5g-flight-cancellations-at-everetts-paine-field/
GIST	<p>Relieving the worries of passengers scheduled to fly on Alaska Air flights through Paine Field in Everett, there should be no further flight cancellations caused by the deployment of 5G cell service.</p> <p>The Federal Aviation Administration this weekend cleared the one aircraft used there for commercial flights as safe to land free of 5G signal interference.</p> <p>Unlike the larger planes built by Airbus and Boeing, the Embraer E175 regional jet that Alaska uses for those flights had not received the all-clear from the FAA regarding possible interference from the 5G signals with cockpit instruments.</p> <p>That led to dozens of flight cancellations last week when fog shrouded the airport and pilots could not rely on their instruments to tell them their height above the ground.</p> <p>The new, more powerful 5G radio signals turned on by Verizon and AT&T at cell towers around the country can potentially interfere with an instrument called an altimeter critical to airplane safety while landing in low-visibility conditions.</p> <p>The FAA has been conducting an airplane-by-airplane and airport-by-airport analysis and cleared many aircraft to fly in low visibility conditions, depending on what model of altimeter was installed on each aircraft and also how close the cell towers at each airport were to the runways.</p> <p>The FAA said Monday that it “approved the E175 over the weekend for low-visibility approaches to Paine Field.”</p> <p>Alaska Air officials said late Monday that they had just received the good news.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/30 Seattle plan: give police bldg. to BLM group
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/as-police-were-abandoning-spd-east-precinct-seattle-officials-drafted-plan-to-give-station-near-chop-to-a-black-lives-matter-group/
GIST	<p>At the height of Seattle’s racial justice protests in 2020, then-Mayor Jenny Durkan’s administration drafted legislation to transfer the Police Department’s East Precinct building to a Black Lives Matter activist organization and researched relocating the station’s operations, newly released documents show.</p> <p>That June, as cops lobbed tear gas from behind barricades, and protesters on the streets surrounding the precinct called for the Police Department to be defunded, Durkan’s office behind the scenes briefly contemplated handing over the multimillion dollar property that had become the focus of the demonstrations.</p> <p>Calvin Goings, the director of the city’s Department of Finance and Administrative Services (FAS), emailed three memos and a draft resolution to Durkan on the afternoon of June 8, 2020 — at about the same time police were abandoning the East Precinct on Capitol Hill.</p> <p>The draft resolution for transferring the property to Black Lives Matter Seattle-King County (BLMSKC) included a July 1 effective date, and Durkan’s office subsequently discussed the possibility with the nonprofit, which at one point pushed to remake the building as a hub for public health and community care.</p> <p>“Good afternoon Mayor, Please see the attached documents as requested. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns,” Goings wrote at 3:10 p.m. on one of the most chaotic days in recent Seattle history, after more than a week of confrontations between police and protesters that the Durkan administration was struggling to control.</p> <p>The summer of 2020 was an impactful period, yet many City Hall deliberations — such as work on a potential East Precinct transfer — happened behind closed doors, leaving journalists and residents in the dark. Text messages exchanged among a number of key decision makers, including Durkan and her police and fire chiefs, have gone missing.</p> <p>More than a year and a half later, the East Precinct memos, obtained by The Seattle Times this month through a records request, are the only details that City Hall has publicly disclosed about the potential transfer, shedding some light on an idea that Durkan has since distanced herself from. They’re already playing a role in at least one lawsuit against the city, brought by businesses and residents over the Capitol Hill Organized Protest (CHOP).</p> <p>The city didn’t end up transferring the East Precinct property, which police reoccupied on July 1, 2020. Durkan, whose term expired last month, dropped the idea after “the very preliminary work by FAS and the realities of policing confirmed it was neither feasible nor in the best interest of public safety,” Chelsea Kellogg, a spokesperson for Durkan, said in an email last week.</p> <p>BLMSKC ultimately supported a position held by the Rev. Harriett Walden, a community leader who spoke out in favor of police returning to the building, Kellogg added. Walden noted that the first Black member of the Seattle City Council, Sam Smith, had supported the establishment of the East Precinct, which opened in 1986 after years of controversy.</p> <p>BLMSKC was not closely involved with the protests on Capitol Hill, nor with the CHOP. Walden didn’t know about conversations with the mayor’s office about transferring the East Precinct building to BLMSKC, she said this month.</p> <p>Police Department officials also weren’t included in the conversations, according to spokesperson Sgt. Randy Huserik. “We were not aware of any plans on the city’s part to permanently leave the precinct, or any plans to share the space with the community,” he said in an email Friday.</p>

In a recent deposition, former Deputy Mayor Casey Sixkiller said the Durkan administration nixed the East Precinct transfer possibility after the activists decided they didn't want the property. It was a coincidence that the draft resolution was shared on the same afternoon the precinct was abandoned, Sixkiller said.

The Times contacted BLMSKC board members about the matter.

"Black Lives Matter Seattle-King County will not make a statement at this time," board member Anthony Canape said in an email Monday.

The Durkan administration's work on a potential East Precinct transfer didn't surface publicly until Sixkiller was deposed and until former Police Chief Carmen Best mentioned the matter in a book last year.

Since then, Durkan representatives have denied the building was offered and downplayed the notion that City Hall seriously pursued a transfer, attributing the idea to some demand letters from activists and to City Councilmember Kshama Sawant, who on June 11, 2020, tweeted she would sponsor legislation to convert the property into a community center.

"There was no plan to transfer the East Precinct and from the time SPD made the decision to temporarily evacuate the precinct for safety reasons, it always planned to return," Kellogg said.

But the FAS memos from June 8, 2020, demonstrate that Durkan's office was interested in a transfer before the precinct was abandoned and before Sawant weighed in. A June 15 letter from BLMSKC demanding a transfer and offering to contribute millions of dollars to repurpose the building was circulated by mayoral staffers. And additional FAS memos from June 17, 2020, indicate the administration continued for more than a week to explore the possibility of permanently relocating East Precinct police operations.

Kellogg suggested Durkan didn't ask for the June 8, 2020, draft resolution.

"Interesting that you assume and state that the Mayor asked for a draft resolution on this property when that is not how the process works," she said. "FAS oversees both city owned property and many real estate deals."

FAS spokesperson Melissa Mixon said the mayor's office triggered the work.

"The Durkan administration directed FAS — in its capacity as the city's real estate and facility management agency — to outline the process to transfer the East Precinct to BLMSKC," Mixon said this month.

June 8, 2020

The evacuation of the East Precinct on June 8, 2020, followed more than a week of intense protests, including standoffs over multiple nights between police and protesters at barricades around the precinct.

Durkan ordered Best to have the barricades removed and to allow protesters to pass by. Instead, the precinct was abandoned and many protesters lingered in the area, setting up what came to be called the CHOP.

Durkan and Best denied they were involved in the decision to leave the precinct but never publicly named who was responsible. According to a report released in October by the city's Office of Police Accountability (OPA), Assistant Chief Tom Mahaffey ordered the evacuation. In interviews with OPA, he gave conflicting accounts as to whether he directly informed Best.

One of the June 8, 2020, memos from FAS reviewed options for [moving the physical contents of the precinct](#); a second memo explored [alternative sites](#) for the precinct's operations; and a third memo looked at [transferring the precinct building](#) to BLMSKC. Attached to the third memo was "proposed language that the Mayor could use for a resolution to transfer the property."

The resolution included “whereas” clauses that established the reasons for the transfer, including: “This precinct houses Seattle Police officers who patrol Seattle’s Central District neighborhood and has been seen as a symbol of police oppression in one of Seattle’s historically Black neighborhoods. This property is valued in excess of \$5,000,000.”

The resolution then stated: “The City transfers permanent use/ownership of ... the East Precinct to Black Lives Matter Seattle-King County, effective July 1, 2020. The City of Seattle agrees to vacate the property and remove all law-enforcement materials and police-related facilities ...”

The memo that focused on the physical contents of the precinct building recommended the city hire a contractor “if a move is called for.”

The memo that focused on alternative sites reported that “a 24-hour search (for expediency)” had turned up no properties available for lease with enough space and recommended the city hire a broker to conduct a more thorough search. Attached to the memo were a list of properties available for lease and a list of city-owned properties where portables could be hosted, “if portables are identified as the solution.” The memo also suggested the city could buy or lease a different building for community use, rather than disrupting police operations.

The memo that contemplated the handover to BLMSKC recommended additional work be done with the City Attorney’s Office to draft property-transfer documents and to ensure that all tax implications were considered.

What happened

The existence of the East Precinct transfer documents [bubbled up last year](#) in the CHOP lawsuit by businesses and residents. The plaintiffs want to make a connection between the potential transfer and the precinct’s evacuation.

[In his deposition](#) for that case, Sixkiller acknowledged that Durkan was contemplating the transfer idea, thinking along the lines of the Daybreak Star Indian Cultural Center established after Native American activists in 1970 occupied decommissioned Fort Lawton. But he recalled “expressing to her that while she may have a strong desire to put this on the table as a conversation point with folks, that it’s not ready.” Sixkiller added: “I can’t imagine that anybody actually asked for a resolution to be drafted,” attributing the legislation to the FAS director’s “can-do spirit.”

The plaintiffs in the CHOP lawsuit included the draft resolution to transfer the precinct and other records as exhibits in a motion filed this month that seeks to certify the federal lawsuit as a class action, attorney Angelo Calfo said this month.

Best also mentioned the possibility of the precinct transfer in her book, published in October. Activists told the former chief that “someone in the mayor’s office had offered them keys to the building, but the BLM leaders did not want to take it over,” she wrote.

On June 15, 2020, a letter from BLMSKC to Durkan and other leaders demanded the precinct be ceded to the organization as part of a process to repurpose the building with Public Health—Seattle & King County for community needs. BLMSKC offered to contribute \$2 million for renovations and \$4 million to help support operations.

“We demand an active, responsive resource and tool that works for us, not one simply handed off for political expediency,” the letter said, adding, “One of our goals in reclaiming the East Precinct for this use is to quiet the physical space and surroundings. Protesters need a reprieve. They need to know that demands have been met ...”

In an email that day about the letter, then-Deputy Mayor Shefali Ranganathan noted to other top mayoral staffers that “they are willing to bring \$ to the table.”

	<p>On June 17, 2020, an FAS staffer sent additional memos about the East Precinct to members of Durkan’s cabinet, including a memo that explored “interim site options” for the precinct’s police operations.</p> <p>“In the event that the SPD East Precinct operations do not move back to the Capitol Hill location, it will require at least 1-2 years to develop a new long-term site,” that memo said, recommending a property at 1130 Rainier Ave. S. as a suitable interim site.</p> <p>Another June 17 memo looked at the possibility of co-locating police and community functions at the East Precinct property.</p> <p>After a weekend of shootings in the CHOP, Durkan announced June 22, 2020, that the police would go back to the East Precinct building, and on July 1, 2020, they returned. In a news conference that day, Durkan said Walden would be “leading outreach” about the future of the East Precinct.</p> <p>“I truly believe we can reimagine the space, a shared space, including a community room in the East Precinct and things in and around Capitol Hill,” Durkan added.</p> <p>Walden hadn’t agreed to lead any outreach, she said later that month. Nothing came of the idea for community space in the East Precinct.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Hopes bolstered omicron wave is waning
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/falling-u-s-hospitalizations-infections-bolster-hope-omicron-wave-is-waning-11643636428?mod=hp_lead_pos6
GIST	<p>Covid-19 case counts and hospitalizations in the U.S. continued to decline, according to the latest data, bolstering hopes that the Omicron wave of the pandemic has peaked even as deaths of people with the disease reached the highest levels at the weekend in almost a year.</p> <p>The seven-day average of people in U.S. hospitals with Covid-19 fell below 144,000 on Sunday for the first time in nearly three weeks. The number has been falling now for about 10 days, according to data from the Department of Health and Human Services.</p> <p>Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Monday that he tested positive for Covid-19. He had been in isolation since Thursday, after one of his three children contracted the virus. “I’m feeling fine and I’ll continue to work remotely this week while following public health guidelines,” he said on his official Twitter account. “Everyone, please get vaccinated and get boosted.”</p> <p>In the U.S., the seven-day average of daily recorded infections fell below 500,000 for the first time since Jan. 3—having peaked above 800,000 midmonth, according to figures from Johns Hopkins University.</p> <p>The seven-day average of Covid-19 deaths—a figure that lags behind other indicators of the disease—passed 2,400 on Saturday, the highest since last February, before falling slightly Sunday.</p> <p>For a proportion of people, the disease isn’t the main reason for hospitalization or death because of the unprecedented prevalence of the Omicron variant among the general population.</p> <p>In the U.K., death-certificate data from the country’s Office for National Statistics showed that the virus was the underlying cause in around three-quarters of all deaths with Covid-19 in England in the week ending Jan. 14, when Omicron was responsible for almost every case in the country.</p> <p>The U.S. data reinforces the experience of previous countries that Omicron is less dangerous to an infected individual, particularly if vaccinated, but this relative mildness is offset by its high transmissibility that means many more people get infected.</p>

This combination has encouraged governments world-wide to relax restrictions even in the face of record case counts, deciding that keeping Omicron at bay with lockdowns is unlikely to be successful and that vaccinations stave off the worst effects of the disease.

Austria ended its lockdown for the unvaccinated on Monday, lifting restrictions that banned people who had not taken a Covid-19 vaccine from leaving their house.

However, the practical implications of the decision will be limited, since the ban on movement had many exceptions including going to work, sport and recreation, and essential shopping.

Rules demanding the use of vaccine passports in most aspects of public life remain in force: only people who can show proof of vaccination or a recent infection with coronavirus are allowed to use bars, restaurants, events and nonessential shops.

In Italy, the government was expected on Monday to extend Covid-19 containment measures set just before Christmas that expire Jan. 31. Under the current measures, most outdoor events are prohibited and masks are obligatory in all inside and outside public spaces.

Beginning Tuesday, entry to most stores as well as banks and post offices will require vaccination, proof of recovery from Covid-19 or a recent negative test. The unvaccinated are already banned from restaurants, cafes and hotels. Food stores, pharmacies, opticians and pet-supply stores can be accessed by everybody.

Italy is moving cautiously even as new cases continue a steady downward trajectory begun about two weeks ago. New confirmed cases are averaging about 100,000 a day compared with 180,000 a day two weeks ago. Hospitalizations have leveled off while deaths are rising. The daily average of 375 deaths is the highest currently in Europe.

Also from Tuesday, more than 1.5 million people 50 and older in Italy who aren't vaccinated or haven't recovered from Covid-19 in the past six months are subject to a 100 euros fine, equivalent to \$111. Beginning Feb. 15, all people in Italy over 50 will be required to be vaccinated or recently recovered to be able to work. Until then, a negative Covid-19 test every few days remains an alternative for holdouts.

In France, the seven-day average of new recorded infections through Jan. 30 was down 6.1% from a week earlier to 338,000 a day. The number of new admissions to intensive care for Covid-19 are down 2% from a week earlier, and the number of new infections in the country has been falling for several days.

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HEADLINE	01/31 Teachers quitting; businesses hiring them
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/teachers-are-quitting-and-companies-are-hot-to-hire-them-11643634181?mod=hp_lead_pos11
GIST	<p>Burned out teachers are leaving the classroom for jobs in the private sector, where talent-hungry companies are hiring them—and often boosting their pay—to work in sales, software, healthcare and training, among other fields.</p> <p>The rate of people quitting jobs in education rose more than in any other industry in 2021, according to federal data. Many of those are teachers exhausted from toggling between online and classroom teaching, shifting Covid-19 protocols and dealing with challenging students, parents and administrators. According to LinkedIn, the share of teachers on the site who left for a new career increased by 62% last year.</p> <p>The exodus is worsening a nationwide teacher shortage and proving a boon to hiring managers in industries such as IT services and consulting, hospitals and software development. Teachers' ability to absorb and transmit information quickly, manage stress and multitask are high-demand skills, recruiters and careers coaches say. Classroom instructors are landing sales roles and jobs as instructional coaches, software engineers and behavioral health technicians, according to LinkedIn.</p>

The potential for career and pay growth—some roles are paying tens of thousands of dollars above typical teacher salaries—is alluring amid a long stretch of Zoom learning and pandemic-stressed classrooms, former teachers say.

“Every time I met somebody, they’d say, ‘We love teachers! I don’t know how you do it,’” says Amelia Watson, who is 24 years old and taught sixth grade in Pearl, Miss. She quit in early January to work for a staffing agency as a recruitment coordinator after posting on LinkedIn that she [was open to work](#). “That feels good, but it’s simply not enough to get you through each day.”

Shelby Ashworth, 31, says she typically arrived at least an hour before school started and greeted her masked kindergartners with air hugs. She knew it was time to consider a new career when she had trouble getting out of the car each morning after she arrived at her school in Smyrna, Tenn.

Ms. Ashworth, who sells watercolors and lettering prints through an Etsy store, started considering a career change in March 2021. She thought a graphic-design job might offer her the flexibility and growth opportunities she wanted and briefly considered earning another college degree before deciding to teach herself the Adobe suite of design programs and build a portfolio.

When a graphic-design job opened at a nearby book distribution company, Ms. Ashworth realized she knew the hiring manager and reached out, landing it last summer. Now, she designs ads and digital guides and works on the company’s website. She gets to work from home three days a week. She has more time with her 4-year-old daughter and got a small raise in the new job, though she says she would have taken a pay cut to do it.

“My happiness was worth more,” she says.

Some teachers say they started looking for new roles toward the end of last school year to minimize disruption to their classes. Others tried to hang on to avoid leaving midyear but said the strain became too great. The most resignations in 2021 were handed in during September, October and November, according to federal data.

Teacher pay varies widely by geography and seniority. In the 2019-2020 school year, teachers in public elementary and secondary schools in California, Massachusetts and New York earned more than \$80,000 a year, on average, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Teachers in Florida, Mississippi and South Dakota earned less than \$50,000. Many, but not all, teachers receive pensions.

Raven Wilson, 30, says she had three goals as she considered quitting her job in education: earn more money, work in tech, work with adults.

She searched online, following Instagram hashtags such as #careersforteachers and #teachersleaving to see what had worked for others, and paid \$3,000 for a training course in instructional design that she hoped would help her transition to the field, only to realize that she disliked it.

Ms. Wilson, who lives in Newport News, Va., refocused her job hunt on companies whose products she had used in the classroom. Last April, she landed a job at an educational-technology startup, training teachers and administrators to use the company’s software and troubleshooting issues. She says she liked the autonomy but wanted to make more money. In October she moved to a similar role at a company that makes software for English learners. Ms. Wilson says she now earns twice what she did teaching first grade.

“I left the one career I thought I was going to do forever,” Ms. Wilson says. “Why settle for anything that was not for me?”

Many teachers struggle with leaving a career [they consider a calling](#), says Daphne Gomez, a career coach who helps teachers break into new occupations. The pandemic has shown teachers they have other options and avenues to success, whether they define that as money, fulfillment or professional growth, she adds.

Ms. Watson, the sixth-grade teacher in Pearl, Miss., hoped to stay the school year to avoid suspension of her teacher's license, a penalty that some midyear quitters can face. But she says her mental health was deteriorating and she needed to move on, despite that risk. When a recruiter approached her on LinkedIn in the fall she started interviewing and started the new role earlier this year after the school semester ended.

Ms. Watson now helps onboard new hires for a global staffing agency. The money is the same, she says, but the career shift has been transformative.

"I'm treated with respect by my supervisors," Ms. Watson says. "I really feel like the intelligent, driven, real person that I am again for the first time in three years."

For some former teachers, the ability to eat lunch or go to the bathroom at a time of their choosing has been a change. Others say leaving education has been emotionally wrenching, but it helped them recapture a sense of hope in their professional lives.

"The people I interact with on a day-to-day basis are happy," says Nicole Routon, who taught middle school science for 13 years in Louisville, Ky., until December. In January, she became a corporate trainer at a financial-services company, training employees in areas such as improving customer interactions. The company lets her work from home unless she is running an on-site training.

Ms. Routon, 39, says she took a pay cut to leave the classroom. She misses laughing with her students, but says she is happier in an environment where problems are treated as solvable and co-workers are open to new ideas.

"It felt like a sinking ship," Ms. Routon says of teaching school during the pandemic. "Nothing is changing and everything is a problem. It's a hard state to live in all the time."

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HEADLINE	01/31 UK report: Downing Street lockdown parties
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/boris-johnsons-downing-street-criticized-in-report-over-parties-during-lockdowns-11643640882?mod=hp_lead_pos4
GIST	<p>LONDON—A British government report said multiple parties held in Downing Street during Covid-19 lockdowns were a failure of leadership and shouldn't have happened, leaving Prime Minister Boris Johnson fighting to quell a rebellion within the ranks of his Conservative Party.</p> <p>The short report, compiled by senior civil servant Sue Gray, outlined several social events that took place in government offices over the past two years during times when ordinary Britons were ordered to avoid or reduce socializing.</p> <p>Ms. Gray said there was a "serious failure" to observe the high standards expected in government. "Some of the events should not have been allowed to take place. Other events should not have been allowed to develop as they did," she said.</p> <p>The civil servant said she was tasked with investigating 16 cases where parties are alleged to have happened on government premises. Ms. Gray shared her findings with the British police, who are also probing the matter and will determine whether Mr. Johnson or other Downing Street officials broke the law. Ms. Gray said 12 events, including one alleged to have occurred in the prime minister's flat, are now being probed by the police.</p>

The report said it couldn't make reference to the parties under police investigation. It is unclear when the police investigation will conclude. Breaches of lockdown restrictions can result in fines ranging from 100 pounds to 3,200 pounds, equivalent to \$135 to \$4,300.

Downing Street has said several parties were held during lockdowns, for which Mr. Johnson has apologized and said that he thought at least one of the gatherings he attended, a drinks party in May 2020, was a work event.

The publication of the report marks the latest twist in a crisis that has already wounded Mr. Johnson, who is trying to avert a full-scale rebellion in his Conservative Party that could see him ousted from office. Some Tory lawmakers have already called for his resignation. Other Conservative members of Parliament, as well as some members of his cabinet, have said they were awaiting the report before deciding whether to call a vote of confidence in their leader.

Mr. Johnson is due to address Parliament shortly.

Given several parts of the report detailing potentially criminal breaches were censored, it is unclear whether lawmakers will now wait for a complete police report into the matter before deciding whether to back the prime minister. Much will hinge on whether Mr. Johnson is himself charged with committing a crime, officials say.

Since the Conservatives have a large majority in the British Parliament, it would take a party putsch to oust Mr. Johnson.

To trigger a confidence ballot, 54 lawmakers need to send letters to a special Conservative Party committee. If that threshold is reached, more than half of the Tories' 359 lawmakers would need to vote against Mr. Johnson for him to be removed from office.

In recent days, momentum to oust Mr. Johnson has appeared to ease as anger over the alleged breaches subsided. Mr. Johnson met with wavering lawmakers in a bid to shore up support after his popularity tumbled in the polls over the lockdown gatherings.

A small group of Tory lawmakers faithful to Mr. Johnson meet twice a day to pore over spreadsheets detailing potential rebels, according to one person involved. They have enlisted more than 100 fellow Conservative lawmakers to go and talk wavering colleagues round, the person said. Meanwhile, the government has announced a slew of new policies this week as it seeks to put the scandal behind it.

Mr. Johnson has previously said that he would fight any leadership challenge.

The prime minister has apologized for attending a drinks party in the Downing Street garden in May 2020, when Britons were only allowed to meet one other person outside.

Mr. Johnson has also apologized to Queen Elizabeth II after his aides held a party the night before the [funeral of her husband](#), Prince Philip, last spring. With strict limits in place on the number of people who could attend funerals, the queen sat alone during the service.

Downing Street also said that several staff gathered to wish Mr. Johnson a happy birthday in June 2020 and present him with a cake when indoor gatherings were banned.

Mr. Johnson has repeatedly said he never knowingly broke the rules. His spokesman has said Mr. Johnson didn't break the law.

It is only the second time in a century that a sitting British prime minister has been part of a police investigation. The police haven't said whether Mr. Johnson is a subject of the police inquiry.

The disclosure marks the ultimate test of Mr. Johnson's renowned political survival skills.

	<p>The British leader has bounced back from scandal before and remains popular with many of the tens of thousands of rank-and-file members of the Tory party. However, Conservative lawmakers must now weigh whether the man who delivered Brexit and in December 2019 landed them their biggest parliamentary majority in more than three decades has become an electoral liability.</p> <p>The comfortable majority that Mr. Johnson acquired during the 2019 election meant that he has until now largely been impervious to dissent from his lawmakers.</p> <p>However, several Conservative camps have expressed discontent with his leadership. A group of libertarian lawmakers in his party, who also helped engineer Britain's split from the European Union, were deeply opposed to lockdown restrictions, as well as tax raises the government has planned. A group of more centrist Conservatives still smart at the pressure tactics Mr. Johnson employed to pull the country out of the EU.</p> <p>Meanwhile, Conservative lawmakers who were elected in 2019 and represent newly acquired blue-collar districts worry that Mr. Johnson isn't doing enough to protect this voter base's interests.</p> <p>Whether lawmakers collectively decide to pull the trigger on Mr. Johnson is unclear. The number of no-confidence letters submitted to Conservative officials is a closely kept secret and the subject of heated speculation in Parliament.</p> <p>So far, Mr. Johnson has contained rebellion in his own cabinet. The two people considered most likely to replace Mr. Johnson are Treasury chief Rishi Sunak and Foreign Secretary Liz Truss. Both previously issued cautious statements of support for the prime minister. How they react now will be key.</p>
Return to Top	<p>Read the document: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/01/31/world/europe/report-of-sue-gray-investigation-into-downing-street-lockdown-parties.html</p>

HEADLINE	01/31 Traffic cameras reduce danger, worsen it?
SOURCE	https://crosscut.com/news/2022/01/are-wa-traffic-cameras-reducing-dangerous-driving-or-making-it-worse
GIST	<p>Seattle traffic enforcement cameras issued over 20 times more tickets than police officers in 2021. That's a huge jump from 2019, when the cameras issued a little over three times the tickets humans did, according to Seattle Municipal Court data. This trend could continue as Seattle, like other Puget Sound cities, leans on automatic enforcement to monitor driver behavior on city streets amid staffing struggles in police departments.</p> <p>The cameras are viewed by officials as a way to decrease instances of police officer bias during traffic stops while monitoring vehicles continuously. It's also a tool many city leaders hope will improve safety amid a rise in road deaths locally and nationally. Since the state allowed the use of automatic traffic enforcement more than a decade and a half ago, nearly two dozen cities have installed the cameras at busy intersections and outside schools with the goal of modifying driver behavior.</p> <p>The impact of traffic enforcement cameras on safety around Puget Sound is conflicting. National studies have found similar results. A handful of cities, including Auburn and Burien, removed the systems after councilmembers decided data didn't show the cameras were improving safety. Many others that continue to rely on the automatic systems – and in Seattle's case expand what traffic laws the cameras enforce – are seeing varying levels of results.</p> <p>Lynnwood, one of the first cities in the state to adopt automatic enforcement, turned to the cameras to curb red light running in 2007. It wasn't just the busiest intersection where drivers were running red lights; it was happening all over the city, according to Paul Coffelt, Lynnwood's traffic engineer.</p> <p>The goal of the cameras was to improve safety, he said, by reducing red-light running which in turn would curtail collisions.</p>

Data from photo-enforced locations is showing a different story. Tickets and crashes both trended up between 2017 and 2021, [according to city data](#). (Prior to 2017, Lynnwood counted collisions differently.) The city operates both red-light and speed cameras at 11 locations.

“The photo enforcement system has absolutely had an impact, a positive impact, on safety in the city of Lynnwood,” Coffelt said. “But because there’s a human factor involved, of people not willing to change their behavior or that they can’t develop the skill. And they are going to continue to receive the photo enforcement citations.”

In the early days of the cameras, Coffelt anticipated the number of citations given out each year would level out. Over the last five years, however, ticket numbers grew 15%.

“I was hoping that we would get to where we don’t have people running red lights anymore,” he said. Some of the ticketing increase can be explained by the massive growth that has brought more people and vehicles to the region, he said, but it still doesn’t account for all of that surge.

Fewer complaints, more requests

Public opinion has shifted over the traffic enforcement cameras since they were installed over a decade ago. At first, residents accused the city of using the cameras as a cash grab, Bellevue Police Department Capt. David Sanabria said.

“We don’t get those complaints any more,” said Sanabria, who was once a motorcycle cop assigned to traffic enforcement. “People are actually asking for cameras to be placed in school zones.”

Now Sanabria supervises the team that processes the tickets issued at its seven photo enforcement locations that monitor vehicles for speeding in a school zone or running red lights. [According to Washington state law](#), an officer must review the photos before a citation is issued. Unlike tickets handed out by police officers, camera citations are processed like a parking fine and don’t leave a mark on driving records.

“These cameras can monitor thousands of cars in an hour, they are consistent and quite frankly tireless. They monitor our intersections 24/7, 365, they don’t call in sick, they don’t take vacation days,” said Sanabria. “When they are activated, they capture the violation and it is our sincere hope it alters driving behavior.”

In Bellevue, the data tell a confusing picture. Before the pandemic jumbled traffic patterns and closed schools, the number of citations issued trended slightly upward between 2016 to 2019, [according to city data](#), as collisions were declining at these photo enforced locations.

Digging deeper, it gets even more complex. While total crashes were down during this time, collisions resulting in an injury actually increased at places with the cameras.

“I don’t think you can just look at the individual stats as the total number of citations and number of collisions,” Sanabria said. “The cameras were placed in areas where they are monitoring certain things; that is rear-end collisions and right-angle collisions.”

Pre-COVID, city data show the number of rear-end and right-angle collisions was dropping at photo enforced locations.

“The cameras have been successful, even though the numbers are what they are. There’s always going to be that human factor,” Sanabria said. “Especially now with the amount of driver distraction that exists.”

Like the data from Bellevue, studies on traffic enforcement cameras show conflicting results, especially for red-light cameras. [Some show a positive impact](#); reducing red-light running as much as 21% and

decreasing collisions by 29%. [Other researchers found a change](#) in the type of crash, often from angle to rear-end, but no evidence the cameras reduced total crashes or injuries.

Cameras in school zones seem to have more success at modifying driver behavior, according to studies, most of which found vehicle speeds dropped outside schools when comparing data before and after installation. They also tend to be the most priciest tickets issued by the cameras.

“There's a lot of research on the impact of traffic enforcement cameras and results have been conflicting,” said Yinhai Wang, a civil and environmental engineering professor at the University of Washington. “It’s a great tool, but must be used carefully, and properly.”

The cameras need to be placed in areas where there are a lot of vehicles violating traffic rules, he added. “If these cameras truly work, people will change their driving behavior,” Wang said. “In the initial stage when the system is installed, you may see a high number of citations, but with the years [they’re] supposed to be reducing down.”

Is the future automated enforcement?

Amid COVID and struggles to fully staff the police department, Seattle relies even more on traffic enforcement cameras than just a few years ago. In 2021, officers handed out 5 percent of tickets.

Some of that increase in citations is linked to just one location Seattle added last year. Cameras now issue tickets to unauthorized vehicles using the [Spokane Street Bridge](#) which is reserved for emergency vehicles, transit riders and a few other select groups while the West Seattle Bridge is closed for repairs. Those without permission must use the First Avenue Bridge detour or risk a \$75 ticket.

In recent years, fewer officers have been dedicated to traffic enforcement as focus shifted to priority and 911 calls, said Sgt. Randy Huserik, a public affairs officer with the Seattle Police Department.

The flashing signs and the pricey school zone ticket that starts at \$237 seems to be a good reminder for drivers in Seattle as fewer and fewer tickets are issued outside school buildings. After all the school zone cameras came online in 2016 in Seattle, citation numbers dropped by 19% the next year. And they continue to drop, [according to city data](#).

Collisions also decreased.

Benefits of the red-light system seem a bit more nebulous for Seattle. Despite both crashes and citations trending up between 2013 to 2019, Venu Nemani, a traffic engineer for Seattle Department of Transportation, argued that the cameras at red lights and in school zones were improving safety.

He also pointed to growth as one factor in the increasing number of red-light citations issued year over year. A [2017 study analyzing three years of crashes](#) before and after the cameras were installed also showed a 40% reduction in angle collisions. This reduction could have an overall impact on injuries, as angle collisions often result in more serious crashes than rear-end ones.

Automatic enforcement is a critical safety tool, Nemani said. “Behavior modification is our primary goal; we approach it from that perspective.”

The city is bringing 11 more cameras online this year, which will ticket vehicles blocking intersections between light cycles, also known as blocking the box, and using the bus lane.

Blocking the box inhibits mobility and safety for people walking and rolling, and creates congestion at intersections that can impede emergency vehicle response time, said Hester Serebrin, the policy director at Transportation Choices Coalition.

“Manual enforcement of those kinds of violations – police officers in cars – exacerbates congestion and safety challenges, and poses a risk of driver/officer altercations,” she said. “We see automatic enforcement as one way of removing that sort of interaction.”

Ultimately, cameras and officers should not be needed to ensure drivers follow traffic laws, the nonprofit argues, like many other advocacy groups. They want to see cities overhaul and narrow streets, so people naturally go slower.

“Design streets so enforcement is not needed,” Serebrin said. “That’s the ideal.”

A 2020 report by the state’s Cooper Jones Active Transportation Safety Council made a similar argument. While automated traffic enforcement systems can reduce speeds, [the report concluded](#), “Physical changes to roadways are often needed to make the reduction in vehicle speed permanent.”

After an eight-year hiatus, school zone cameras are likely coming back to Auburn. The council voted to remove red-light and speed cameras in 2014 when sparse data failed to convince a majority of the effectiveness of the automatic traffic enforcement system.

“We know there is a need to slow people down around school zones,” said Cecile Malik, a senior transportation planner with the city of Auburn.

With a new council and a new approach, the city is trying automatic enforcement again as a way to slow drivers down and make school zones safer while shifting some traffic enforcement duties away from the police department which, like many others, struggles to fill positions.

The city plans to choose locations based on both speed data, but also make sure there is a geographical balance to ensure all the cameras aren’t installed in just one area of the city, Malik said.

“We know that higher speeds lead to more serious injuries, so lower speeds will make the school zones safe,” said Malik. “We think the school zones are important locations to get driver compliance and we really hope we will see a reduction.”

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HEADLINE	01/31 Seattle growth slows, suburbs fastest growth
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/data/seattle-didnt-grow-much-in-2021-these-suburban-cities-did/
GIST	<p>Seattle, the fastest-growing big U.S. city of the 2010s, isn’t growing so fast anymore.</p> <p>Newly revised population data from the Washington Office of Financial Management shows the state’s largest city only grew by 0.7% from April 1, 2020 to April 1, 2021 — that’s a net gain of about 5,400 people.</p> <p>That puts the total population of Seattle at just over 742,000.</p> <p>It’s a far cry from the population gains we saw through much of the 2010s, when the city sometimes grew by more than 3% in a single year.</p> <p>It should be noted that the state revised its 2021 population estimates at the end of last year. Initially, the figure for Seattle was quite a bit higher, at nearly 770,000, which made it appear that city’s population had grown at a significantly faster rate.</p> <p>Why did the state revise its numbers downward?</p> <p>Their initial estimate came out before we got our first glimpse of the 2020 census data, which was released in August. The 2020 census numbers are, of course, a head count of every person living in the U.S. (or, at</p>

least, our the best attempt at a head count). As such, these numbers are the benchmark for all population estimates over the course of the decade.

And the 2020 census showed Seattle's population was just 737,000. That figure is even lower (by about 10,000) than the state's 2019 estimate for Seattle.

Does that mean that Seattle's population shrank in 2020? It's possible. There were certainly a lot of anecdotes about people leaving big cities during the pandemic, choosing to relocate in the suburbs or smaller towns.

But it's also possible that our 2019 population estimates were a little inflated, and the 2020 census just represents a correction, rather than a shrinking population in Seattle.

If Seattle did shrink a little in 2020, that doesn't appear to be a lasting trend. While the city's 0.7% growth in 2021 is modest, it's still growth.

And that's not really a surprise when you look at the housing market in Seattle. The city is still adding housing units (check out all the new high-rises along Denny Way in South Lake Union), the market for homes is red-hot, and [rents](#) are up slightly from before the pandemic. These are not signs of a shrinking city.

The state uses a wide variety of records to determine changes in population. Some examples include vital statistics data (births and deaths), a host of administrative records (counts of registered voters, licensed drivers, motor-vehicle registrations, K-12 students, Medicaid and Medicare recipients), housing data (number of completed housing units, postal delivery statistics, etc.) and data from "group quarter" housing (dormitories, nursing homes, prisons, etc.).

Seattle isn't alone in its slower rate of growth. Bellevue's population only increased by 0.5% in 2021, a net gain of about 750 people. Bellevue's population now stands at nearly 153,000. And Tacoma's population shrank slightly, down 0.3% from 2020, to just under 219,000.

Of the largest cities in our metro area, Everett had the fastest growth, at 1.5%, bringing the population to 112,000. Among cities with at least 30,000 residents, Lake Stevens grew the fastest, at 3.9%.

The fastest growth rate in our metro area — and by a wide margin — was in the small city of Black Diamond, about 30 miles southeast of Seattle. Its population grew by 13% in 2021, an increase of more than 600 people. Black Diamond is home to a large new master-planned community called Ten Trails, which is being built in phases. This community, which opened in 2018, will eventually include roughly 6,000 homes, bringing more than 15,000 people to Black Diamond.

The other fastest-growing places in our metro area last year were, like Black Diamond, small cities not in close proximity to Seattle: Edgewood, Bonney Lake, Sultan and Arlington. All these places grew by more than 4%.

This does seem to support the idea that the pandemic, and the subsequent rise of working from home, is pushing more people toward smaller communities — places where you get more home for your buck, and where there's easy access to outdoor recreation.

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HEADLINE	01/31 Ukraine wave bomb threats tense situation
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/31/world/ukraine-russia-us#ukraine-russia-bomb-threats
GIST	KYIV, Ukraine — A bomb is about to go off. Callers have communicated some variation of those words to the police in Ukraine at least 300 times in the past month, a spate of fake bomb threats that officials say is designed to sow panic and fear.

With tens of thousands of Russian troops amassed at its borders and the West warning that war could break out any day, the bomb threats have added to the growing sense of anxiety in the nation of 44 million.

While the Pentagon warned on Friday that Russia had now amassed enough troops to launch a full-scale invasion of the country, analysts have said that Russian aggression aimed at destabilizing the government could come in many forms. And it is the collapse of the state from within — abetted by Russian efforts — that Ukrainian officials have called the most clear and present danger.

The rate of bomb threats in January in Ukraine was six times higher than the average for last year.

The Ukrainian police say they have checked more than 3,000 buildings since the beginning of January in response to [more than 300 phoned-in bomb threats](#). So far the threats have all turned out to be fake — causing disruption but no damage or loss of life.

In a [statement](#), the country's security service said the goal was obvious: creating chaos, stirring fear and undermining the government.

The threats have been mostly aimed at schools and shopping malls, forcing evacuations and closures and in some cases keeping children out of classes for days.

Ukraine's interior minister, Denys Monastyrsky, [wrote](#) on social media that the fake bomb alerts were mostly coming from Russia, from Russian-controlled territory in eastern Ukraine and from Russian allies, including Belarus.

The threats come as Ukraine braces for more cyberattacks — which could range from efforts to cripple the country's infrastructure to propaganda campaigns aimed at sowing fear and confusion.

A Ukrainian government website was recently hacked and a message was posted: "Be afraid and expect the worst."

President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine has repeatedly expressed his concern that internal destabilization posed perhaps an even greater danger than an invasion. Panic, he has said, puts the economy in danger.

It is this concern that prompted him to publicly call on the United States and other European leaders to cool their talk of war being imminent. At the same time, he has blamed Russia for the bomb threats and efforts to cause turmoil within Ukraine.

"Why are you doing this?" Mr. Zelensky said at a news conference in comments directed at Russian President Vladimir V. Putin, in which he mentioned both the military buildup at the border and the flurry of bomb threats. "To threaten us? What is this sadomasochism? What is the pleasure of this? Of someone being afraid?"

Russian officials have repeatedly denied meddling in Ukraine's internal affairs. And they say they have also been dealing with their own wave of bomb threats, which have forced Russian schools and shopping centers to evacuate tens of thousands of people. They have blamed Ukraine for the surge.

In Ukraine, the fake bomb alerts have disrupted classes at dozens of schools, and some Ukrainians are blaming the government for the problem.

"It's getting scary," said Anastasia Kuznetsova, a parent in Kryvyi Rih, a city in central Ukraine. Her 9-year-old daughter could not go to school for nearly two weeks this month because of repeated bomb threats to the building.


Olena Ronzhyna, mother of a 12-year-old from Cherkasy, in central Ukraine, said people were upset and blaming the government.

“Children have been home for almost a month,” she said.

Yet Ms. Ronzhyna believes that if Russia is hoping to damage Ukraine by undermining trust in its government, it will not work. Ukrainians have always taken great pride in their deep distrust of their government, and they relish criticizing it harshly and openly.

“We never trust any of our governments,” she said. “Starting from the first day after an election.”

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HEADLINE	01/31 New CDC data shows booster effectiveness								
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/31/briefing/boosters-cdc-covid-effectiveness.html								
GIST	<p>The C.D.C. has begun to publish data on Covid outcomes among people who have received booster shots, and the numbers are striking:</p> <div><h3>Weekly average deaths per 100,000</h3><p>From Oct. to Nov. 2021</p><table><thead><tr><th>Group</th><th>Weekly average deaths per 100,000</th></tr></thead><tbody><tr><td>Unvaccinated</td><td>7.8</td></tr><tr><td>Vaccinated, no booster</td><td>0.6</td></tr><tr><td>With booster</td><td>0.1</td></tr></tbody></table></div> <p>Credit...Based on 25 U.S. jurisdictions. Source: C.D.C.</p> <p>As you can see, vaccination without a booster provides a lot of protection. But a booster takes somebody to a different level.</p> <p>This data underscores both the power of the Covid vaccines and their biggest weakness — namely, their gradual fading of effectiveness over time, as is also the case with many other vaccines. If you received two Moderna or Pfizer vaccine shots early last year, the official statistics still count you as “fully vaccinated.” In truth, you are only partially vaccinated.</p> <p>Once you get a booster, your risk of getting severely ill from Covid is tiny. It is quite small even if you are older or have health problems.</p> <p>The average weekly chance that a boosted person died of Covid was about one in a million during October and November (the most recent available C.D.C. data). Since then, the chances have no doubt been higher, because of the Omicron surge. But they will probably be even lower in coming weeks, because the surge is receding and Omicron is milder than earlier versions of the virus. For now, one in a million per week seems like a reasonable estimate.</p> <p>That risk is not zero, but it is not far from it. The chance that an average American will die in a car crash this week is significantly higher — about 2.4 per million. So is the average weekly death rate from influenza and pneumonia — about three per million.</p>	Group	Weekly average deaths per 100,000	Unvaccinated	7.8	Vaccinated, no booster	0.6	With booster	0.1
Group	Weekly average deaths per 100,000								
Unvaccinated	7.8								
Vaccinated, no booster	0.6								
With booster	0.1								

With a booster shot, Covid resembles other respiratory illnesses that have been around for years. It can still be nasty. For [the elderly and immunocompromised](#), it can be debilitating, even fatal — much as the flu can be. The Omicron surge has been so terrible because it effectively subjected tens of millions of Americans to a flu all at once.

For the unvaccinated, of course, Covid remains many times worse than the flu.

‘Heartbreaking’

I’m highlighting these statistics because there is still a large amount of vaccine skepticism in the U.S. I have heard it frequently from readers in the past week, after [our poll](#) on Covid attitudes and partisanship, as well as [the “Daily” episode](#) about the poll.

This vaccine skepticism takes two main forms. The more damaging form is the one that’s common among Republicans. They’re so skeptical of vaccines — partly from [misinformation](#) coming from conservative media figures and Republican politicians — that many remain unvaccinated.

This lack of vaccination is killing people. “It’s cost the lives of people I know, including just last week a friend of 35 years, a person I met on one of the first weekends of my freshman year of college,” David French, a conservative writer who lives in Tennessee, [wrote in The Atlantic](#). “I can’t tell you how heartbreaking it is to see person after person fall to a virus when a safe and effective shot would have almost certainly not just saved their life but also likely saved them from even having a serious case of the disease.”

Dr. Peter Hotez, a vaccine expert at the Baylor College of Medicine, estimates that in the second half of last year, 200,000 Americans needlessly lost their lives because they refused Covid vaccines. “Three doses of either Pfizer or Moderna will save your life,” Hotez told me. “It’s the only way you can be reasonably assured that you will survive a Covid-19 infection.” (Young children, who are not yet eligible for the vaccines, are also highly unlikely to get very sick.)

The vaccines don’t prevent only death. Local data shows the risks of hospitalization are extremely low, too. Vaccination also reduces the risk of long Covid to [very low levels](#).

Healthy and anxious

The second form of vaccine skepticism is among Democrats — although many would recoil at any suggestion that they are vaccine skeptics. Most Democrats are certainly not skeptical about getting a shot. But many are skeptical that the vaccines protect them.

About 41 percent of Democratic voters say they are worried about getting “seriously sick” with Covid, according to [a Kaiser Family Foundation poll](#) released last week. That’s a very high level of anxiety for a tiny risk.

Here’s the proof that much of the fear is irrational: Young Democrats are more worried about getting sick than old Democrats, even though the science says [the opposite should be true](#).

The most plausible explanation for this pattern is political ideology. Younger Democrats are [significantly more liberal](#) than older Democrats, according to the Pew Research Center (and other pollsters, too). Ideology tends to shape Covid views, for a complex mix of often irrational reasons. The more liberal you are, [the more worried about Covid](#) you tend to be; the more conservative you are, the less worried you tend to be.

I know that many liberals believe an exaggerated sense of personal Covid risk is actually a good thing, because it pushes the country toward taking more precautions. Those precautions, according to this view, will reduce [Covid’s death toll](#), which truly is horrific right now. In a later newsletter this week, I will consider that argument.

For now, I'll simply echo the many experts who have pleaded with Americans to get vaccinated and boosted.

Answers and convenience

What might help increase the country's ranks of vaccinated? [Vaccine mandates](#), for one thing — although many Republican politicians, as well as the Republican appointees on the Supreme Court, oppose broad mandates. Private companies can still impose mandates on their employees and customers.

Without mandates, the best hope for increased vaccination is probably community outreach. While many unvaccinated Americans are firmly opposed to getting a shot, others — including some Democrats and independents — remain agnostic. If getting a vaccination is convenient and a nurse or doctor is available to answer questions, they will consider it.

"I cannot count how many people I've spoken to about the Covid vaccine who have been like, 'No, I don't think so. No,'" Dr. Kimberly Manning of Emory University [told](#) The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. "Then I run into them two weeks later and they tell me they got vaccinated."

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HEADLINE	01/31 Some governors: endemic approach time
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/31/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#we-have-to-learn-how-to-live-with-this-some-us-governors-say-its-time-for-an-endemic-approach-to-covid
GIST	<p>The Omicron wave is now receding in states where the extremely contagious variant arrived later, and some governors are saying it's time for pandemic-fatigued Americans to try to restore a sense of normalcy and learn to live with the virus.</p> <p>The United States remains in a precarious position, as hospitals are overstretched and daily deaths are above 2,500 and rising. Case counts are now declining in some interior states, including Arizona, Utah, Colorado, North Dakota, Louisiana and Mississippi, where Omicron swept through more recently, and while new cases are falling nationally, too, they remain far higher than in any other period of the pandemic. And the spread of an Omicron subvariant that appears to be even more contagious has some experts warning that it could take longer than expected for the winter wave to wane.</p> <p>The daily average of U.S. cases remains about 519,000 a day — more than double the worst statistics from last winter. Hospitalizations, which lag cases, seem to have peaked nationally, though they remain higher than last winter's peak. Deaths, which lag more, are also at record levels in some states.</p> <p>In a few states, like Washington and Montana, cases are still rising.</p> <p>A few state leaders said Sunday that while more variants and, inevitably, another surge remain a threat, Omicron has brought the country closer to the endemic stage of the virus.</p> <p>"We're not going to manage this to zero," Gov. Philip D. Murphy of New Jersey, a Democrat, said to Chuck Todd on NBC News' "Meet the Press" on Sunday. "We have to learn how to live with this."</p> <p>Public health experts say the next phase of the virus in the United States will depend on what variants emerge and whether a sluggish vaccination campaign picks up speed. Herd immunity to the coronavirus, experts say, is unlikely to be achieved.</p> <p>The spread of an Omicron subvariant is yet another reminder of the unpredictable path the pandemic could take next.</p> <p>Scientists warn that the new member the Omicron viral family, known BA.2, could drag out the Omicron surge in much of the world. So far, BA.2 doesn't appear to cause more severe disease, and vaccines are just as effective against it as they are against other forms of Omicron. But BA.2 does show signs of spreading more readily.</p>

	<p>“This may mean higher peak infections in places that have yet to peak, and a slowdown in the downward trends in places that have already experienced peak Omicron,” Thomas Peacock, a virologist at Imperial College London, told The Times’s Carl Zimmer.</p> <p>Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the chief Covid adviser to President Biden, recently offered words of cautious optimism, saying he believed outbreaks could become much more manageable in the coming months — to a point where “they’re there, but they don’t disrupt society.”</p> <p>As Omicron declines, Gov. Asa Hutchinson of Arkansas, a Republican, said the United States should move toward treating the virus as if it’s endemic, but remain vigilant. He acknowledged that more variants are inevitable and called on the federal government to help states ramp up testing capacity and access to treatments.</p> <p>“That’s where the federal government needs to step up,” he said on “Meet the Press.” “Let’s take advantage of this going down to be prepared for what’s around the corner.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Austria ends lockdown for unvaccinated
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/31/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#austria-ends-lockdown-for-the-unvaccinated-as-cases-soar
GIST	<p>The Austrian government ended its lockdown for unvaccinated people on Monday, even as it experiences a record number of daily coronavirus cases and prepares to approve a vaccine mandate for adults later this week.</p> <p>Karl Nehammer, the Austrian Chancellor, announced last week that the restrictions would end because the strain on hospitals from cases of the Omicron variant was less severe.</p> <p>Starting Monday, unvaccinated Austrians will no longer be confined to their homes. But they still cannot enter nonessential shops, restaurants and cultural institutions for another two weeks.</p> <p>The rule, which was introduced in mid-November, was one of the first lockdown restrictions in Europe that targeted people who were neither vaccinated nor had recovered from Covid. But as cases continued to rise, the government announced a broader 20-day lockdown for the entire population a week later. A general vaccine mandate was also announced at that time.</p> <p>The upper house of Austria’s Parliament is expected to pass a bill later this week that will make vaccinations mandatory for almost everyone aged 18 and over. Starting March 15, officials will be authorized to do routine checks of vaccination status.</p> <p>People who fail to produce proof of vaccination could face fines as high as 3,600 euros, or about \$4,000.</p> <p>Austria’s vaccination rate is currently 73 percent. Last week Austrian authorities registered a record 38,423 new daily cases.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Asia omicron surge restricts holiday travel
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/31/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#omicron-asia-lunar-new-year
GIST	<p>The Omicron variant has dampened the plans of tens of millions of people across several Asian countries to travel during the Lunar New Year, as officials battle the pandemic for a third year.</p> <p>Observed this year on Feb. 1, Lunar New Year falls just as many countries are seeing surges in coronavirus cases. Omicron is becoming the dominant variant in countries like South Korea, which expects up to 90 percent of its cases to be Omicron-related by the end of February.</p>

Before the pandemic, as many as [three billion trips](#) were made over the holiday in China — often described as the world’s largest annual migration. People visit their hometowns or go on vacation. Once again this year, there will be far fewer trips, with travel regulations and pressure from governments restricting the exodus.

“Large gatherings will have to wait a little longer, as the Omicron variant has forced us to maintain strict measures,” said Singapore’s prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, [in a statement](#) about the holidays. “We must continue to exercise social responsibility and take precautions.”

Singapore has reported a 457 percent increase in daily cases over the past two weeks, according to [Our World in Data](#). The city state’s [Ministry of Health](#) said it expects “cases to double every two or three days.” In December, Singapore and Malaysia temporarily [halted ticket sales](#) for airplanes and buses in response to the rise of Omicron, even for those who were fully vaccinated.

Chinese citizens are under strict government surveillance, with a [color code system](#) restricting their movements and making travel difficult. The country’s “[zero Covid](#)” approach has led to lockdowns across various cities.

In January, Beijing officials reported the city’s [first Omicron case](#) and called for an immediate lockdown in one neighborhood. With the Olympics just around the corner, China has decided [not to sell tickets](#) to most domestic or international spectators.

On Sunday, Beijing reported its highest case count in 18 months, just days before the Games.

South Korea has not placed a travel ban on its citizens, but it has repeatedly urged them to refrain as much as possible from visiting relatives and going on vacation.

Although the country has fully vaccinated 85 percent of its population, according to [Our World in Data](#), it reached a record case count of 17,532 over the long Lunar New Year weekend, which started on Saturday and will last through Wednesday.

Several countries that had put in place strict international travel restrictions will continue moving toward a gradual reopening of their tourism industries.

Vietnam has been slowly reopening to international visitors. Certain destination spots have already opened up, and the country will be fully accessible to travelers in April.

Indonesia lifted a ban on travelers from 14 countries in mid-January, allowing people from any country to visit if they quarantine upon arrival. “Learning from the surge of the Omicron variant cases in various countries, the government has made adequate preparations to deal with it,” President Joko Widodo said in a statement on Friday.

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HEADLINE	01/31 Italy divide: risk takers vs. risk adverse
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/31/world/europe/italy-covid-risk.html
GIST	<p>ROME — The entire family is vaccinated, even the relatives, and all abide by masking requirements and respect Italy’s tough coronavirus restrictions. They are also all over the place in how they are living their lives.</p> <p>Mariagiovanna Togna is willing to accompany her children to outdoor play dates after school. But her husband, more anxious by nature, is still wearing rubber gloves, wiping down groceries and turning away visitors. One of her sisters in Rome is more laid back and goes to yoga class and to work, and her 15-year-old daughter had a birthday party indoors. Her brother, in the northern region of Trento, who finally agreed to get vaccinated, she said, to keep going out to bars, recently vacationed along the Amalfi Coast.</p>

But when Christmas vacation rolled around, their parents, in their 70s, asked him to stay in a bed-and-breakfast.

Everyone who went home to Benevento had to take a rapid test, including another sister, who depends on their mother for babysitting. Even though the government shot down the efforts in the Campania Region, where she lives, to delay in-person school, she prefers to keep her child out of nursery school.

“We are all vaccinated, many with the third dose already, we all have a civic sense about being careful for ourselves and for others,” she said. “But we have different styles of life.”

As the Omicron variant of the coronavirus personally touches or swirls around so many individuals, vaccinated and largely protected families are strained by varying comfort levels. It is much the same the world over, especially where significant portions of the population have been vaccinated, like Italy, which now has one of the highest rates in the world.

[Initially slammed by the virus](#), Italy today holds the promise of a near future where the schism in society is no longer [between the vaccinated and the unvaccinated](#), or the socially responsible and the scofflaws, but between the risk takers and the risk averse.

For many with booster shots, life has become a constant negotiation between those who want to resume dining in restaurants, those still reluctant to accept deliveries and those who just want to get the virus already and get their mandatory quarantines over with.

For many vaccinated families, the recent holiday season and New Year’s celebrations hammered those variations home, as teenagers stumbled in after parties to take a swab test and reunite with shut-in uncles petrified of the virus, or grandparents unsure just how protected their booster shots left them. In Italy, where generations of families often see one another, and frequently live together, navigating the vagaries of Omicron decorum is a constant exercise.

“In my world, there are no no-vax,” said Giuseppe Cavallone, 73, who walked in the Villa Doria Pamphili park in Rome with his wife. But that did not mean they lived carefree. They had given up on going to the movies, in part because of the discomfort of wearing a mask for three straight hours, and had abandoned their annual travel to Paris and London. But their son, also fully vaccinated, was less cautious, flying to Patagonia for vacation.

“The young feel much more free,” said Mr. Cavallone’s wife, Maria Teresa Pucciano, 74. She added that they recently went to a wedding, but a friend of theirs stayed outside in the cold the whole time.

An increasing number of people who have received a third vaccine dose have, emboldened by the apparent light symptoms of Omicron for the vaccinated, entered a bring-it-on phase of the pandemic. Some are trying to time their resulting quarantines to a social and school calendar, or to have infections coincide with those of friends. Others are instead still coming to terms with a virus that is seemingly everywhere, and forcing themselves to adjust their comfort levels and do more, to be more social, to even dine inside an actual restaurant.

On a recent Sunday at the Il Cortile restaurant in Rome, where the front door bore a large reminder that all diners needed to present a health pass and its proof of vaccination, Isabella Carletti, 65, got up from lunch with her husband and walked outside.

“I felt uncomfortable in there, I wanted to get some air,” she said. “We usually book outside, but we couldn’t find a table.”

She lit a cigarette and suggested the smoke was “less dangerous” than the air inside. But then she went back in.

In Italy, more than 80 percent of the population, including children, has had two doses of the vaccine. That number is expected to tick up as 90 percent of the population, including many children who only recently became eligible for vaccination, already has one dose.

The Italian government has gradually tightened the screws on the unvaccinated, and on Tuesday, new restrictions [will come into force requiring vaccination for people 50 and over](#).

“Most of the problems we are facing today depend on the fact that there are unvaccinated people,” Prime Minister Mario Draghi said. He added that “unvaccinated people have a much higher chance of developing the disease and severe forms of the disease” and were putting hospitals under pressure.

To force vaccinations, the health care system will forward the names of the unvaccinated people over 50 to tax authorities so they can be fined. But the real deterrent remains the isolation from public life, with everything from entering a cafe to taking a public bus or going to work banned for the unvaccinated.

Since the government announced its plans, around 600,000 people a day, about 1 percent of the population, have received a dose of a vaccine, including the now 45 percent of Italians who are receiving their third dose. But among them are about also about 60,000 to 90,000 people who are receiving their first dose. Many are probably children, but the government is also confident the new rules are motivating more people over 50, who are more vulnerable, to be vaccinated. There are still an estimated 10 percent of Italians who are unvaccinated, many in their 40s and 50s.

Advocates for a speedier vaccination campaign would like the government to mandate the vaccine to people 40 and up, as about 15 percent of 40-year-olds remain unvaccinated. But the current delicate political moment — with a [destabilizing election for president coming in a matter of days](#) — has put that off for now. In any case, the government is pleased with the progress.

Maria Claudia Di Paolo, 71, and her husband, Natale Santucci, also 71, said they, too, had been encouraged by the success of Italy’s vaccination campaign and worried that the vaccine skeptics were getting too much attention. The couple, who contracted Covid last year after having friends over for dinner, decided recently to have their first nonrelated guest over for a meal.

Then the guest, a doctor like Mr. Santucci, called to say that one of his patients had tested positive, but he himself had tested negative and could still come.

“We said, ‘Better to wait,’” said Mr. Santucci, who added that the couple had moved their weekend family lunches to an outside table at a local restaurant. But they did celebrate Christmas together at home with their children and grandchildren, spaced apart at a big table, avoiding hugs and kisses and feeling out everyone’s comfort level. “There is a great variability inside the vaccinated families,” he said.

Ms. Togna said that she felt isolated and at wit’s end. Seeing so many people around her infected, quarantined and then going on with life, she said, had encouraged her to try to move ever so slightly off the extremely cautious end of the spectrum. But it was hard.

“On one side, I think I have to change my behavior, and drag my whole family along, but it will be very difficult,” she said. “Even if it’s endemic, there is always the risk.”

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HEADLINE	01/31 Beijing quashes dissent Winter Olympics
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/31/world/asia/winter-olympics-crackdown.html
GIST	Chinese authorities have detained activists in their homes and sent others to jail. Censors have shut down the social media accounts of prominent critics. Officials have warned Olympians that protest could bring prosecution.

As athletes, journalists and other participants arrive for the Winter Olympics that begin on Friday, they are encountering some of the most intense security measures ever imposed at an international sporting event. Many of those are precautions against Covid-19, but others reflect the Chinese government's growing intolerance of dissent and criticism.

Hu Jia, a prominent human rights activist, said the police in Beijing were confining him to his apartment. In January, he took to Twitter to [criticize state security agents](#) for questioning, harassing and detaining critics ahead of the Winter Olympics. Since then, the police have visited him four times in eight days.

"They said if I don't stay silent, my rights to visit my mother may be affected," he said, adding that the authorities were determined to quash any overt criticisms of the Games online.

With the authorities tightening their grip across Chinese society, one major question is whether any Olympic participants, including athletes, will be willing or able to speak out on issues the government deems objectionable. Activists and human rights groups have accused the party of decimating civil liberties in Hong Kong, oppressing ethnic minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet, and censoring [Peng Shuai](#), a top tennis player who has mostly disappeared from public view after accusing a senior Chinese leader of sexual assault.

Teng Biao, a Chinese lawyer who was detained and disbarred during the Beijing Olympics in 2008, said that he believed that visiting athletes had "a responsibility to say something" about China's growing repression.

Beijing has made it clear that such conduct could be met with consequences, even as officials have trumpeted their welcome for arriving athletes.

"Any behavior or speech that is against the Olympic spirit, especially against the Chinese laws and regulations, are also subject to certain punishment," Yang Shu, the deputy director of Beijing's Olympic organizing committee, warned during a recent call organized by the Chinese Embassy in Washington.

The crackdown adds to an already restrictive atmosphere. The Games will take place in three bubbles guarded by workers in hazmat gear and cut off from the surrounding cities — and from ordinary citizens. Those inside the bubbles must download a [Chinese app](#) that monitors their health and controls their movements between venues. Researchers say the software has encryption gaps that leave users' personal information exposed.

The Olympic events will take place in front of a limited audience of screened spectators of China's choosing. Organizers have installed fences to keep people out of venues like Beijing's iconic National Stadium, known as the Bird's Nest, where the opening ceremony will be held.

The heavy-handed controls are a "way to show the Chinese governance model works," said Yaqiu Wang, a senior researcher at Human Rights Watch.

Under the current Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, Beijing has turned to harsh authoritarian tactics to quash dissent and build national power. To the party, the Olympics is an emblem of the Chinese political system's success, and Beijing is unafraid to clamp down on those who seek to criticize it.

Olympic [sponsors, advertisers and contractors](#) have warned their employees not to raise sensitive topics, lest they jeopardize companies' access to China's market. Some national teams have advised athletes not to bring their own phones, but to use temporary ones, because of concerns about surveillance.

"What a world for us to be living in," said Mandie McKeown, executive director of the [International Tibet Network](#), a coalition of groups supporting Tibetan rights that helped to organize protests in several cities calling for a boycott of the Olympics.

She criticized the International Olympic Committee for not doing more to press China to ensure free speech and other values written in the Olympic Charters. “It’s just ludicrous,” she said.

The atmosphere contrasts with that of the 2008 Games, when there was hope for some easing of the Chinese Communist Party’s authoritarian proclivities. Despite the widespread censorship and detentions of activists, officials then had opened much of the country to reporters and even allotted space for three protest zones — though registering protests proved impossible.

Nothing like that has happened this time.

Now, Mr. Xi is showing that China has become powerful enough that it does not need to worry about what people think, according to Mr. Teng, the human rights lawyer, who went into exile and is now a visiting scholar at the University of Chicago.

“Compared to 2008, the Chinese government has become more and more powerful and aggressive. It seems they care less about international pressure,” he said in an interview, noting the brazenness of the warnings to foreign athletes.

“They really want to pre-emptively silence the athletes,” he said.

Across the country, the authorities have moved to muzzle those who might speak out while the spotlight is on China. Human rights groups have pointed to the detention or sentencing of five high-profile activists in recent weeks, including Xie Yang, a lawyer who was detained in January in the central city of Changsha for “inciting subversion” and “picking quarrels and provoking disturbances.”

Liang Xiaojun, a lawyer whose law license was revoked last month, said police officers had visited him in mid-January to warn him that China was entering its “Olympic security period.” Since then, he said, officials have been calling him regularly to check on his whereabouts.

Several activists and intellectuals said in interviews that the police have tried to silence them by shutting down their access to social media and the internet.

Zhang Yihe, a Chinese author and historian, said that Chinese censors on Jan. 8 banned her from using various functions on the popular social media app WeChat, in a move she believed was linked to the Olympics. Gao Yu, a veteran journalist and activist, said her WeChat account was also suspended in January. More recently, Ms. Gao said, security officials demanded she shut down her Twitter account.

The Chinese Communist Party “will control people’s speech for the Olympics,” she said, adding, “not even the slightest criticism is allowed.”

Chinese officials have already said that athletes will be given cell services that enable them to circumvent the government’s expansive censorship, which blocks sites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Google. It is unclear if the authorities would seek to punish Olympic participants for online dissent, as they would Chinese citizens.

Mr. Teng said that China’s ability to sideline criticism during such a major event signaled how powerful China had grown since 2008.

“Beijing has the power — the economic and political power — to make the global business silent, even complicit, with human rights violations,” he said.

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HEADLINE	01/30 ICE cancels felony deportation requests
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/30/dhs-cancels-deportation-request-hit-and-run-killer/
GIST	Heriberto Fuerte-Padilla, an illegal immigrant, was driving drunk in 2020 when he smashed into the car driven by a Texas teenager, killing her. He tried to flee the scene, but police caught up with him.

The Homeland Security Department initially said it wanted authorities to pick him up and deport him once Texas punished him, but then it changed its mind. Under rules issued in September by Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, *Fuerte-Padilla* doesn't qualify as a priority anymore.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement also told Texas that it was canceling deportation requests — known as “detainers” — on other illegal immigrants, including some who pleaded guilty to felony charges of evading arrest or had convictions for drunken driving, drug possession or domestic assault injuring a family member.

In each case, ICE told Texas in emails that the detainers were canceled as “priority lifts.” They were no longer important targets under Mr. Mayorkas' rules.

“Here we have a law enforcement agency handing ICE a criminal alien on a silver platter and ICE saying no thank you, and then the law enforcement agency saying really? And ICE saying no, we really don't want to take this person,” said [Jessica Vaughan](#), policy studies director at the Center for Immigration Studies.

Cases were revealed in documents filed in federal court in Texas, where Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton and Louisiana Attorney General Jeff Landry are challenging Mr. Mayorkas' rules. The two states said they have plenty of other examples of canceled detainers they will introduce as the case goes to trial in late February.

Arizona, Montana and Ohio are challenging Mr. Mayorkas' rules in a separate case before a federal judge in Ohio. A hearing is scheduled for the middle of February.

Ms. Vaughan said the cases go to the heart of the Biden administration's claim that it can curtail enforcement, including in cases where the law seems to require it, by citing limited funding.

“What could really sink the administration's case on this is the fact that they have gone so far in slashing deportations that they've crossed whatever gray line there might have been between their need to exercise discretion because of resource limits, and willfully not enforcing the law,” she said.

Mr. Mayorkas developed the rules to force ICE and Customs and Border Protection, the two major immigration enforcement agencies, to home in on the most serious illegal immigrant targets and give a break to those with more minor criminal records.

To be arrested or deported, a migrant now must be a national security risk, a recent border jumper or a public safety risk.

The latter category is creating the biggest headache. Mr. Mayorkas said agents and officers must evaluate and balance criminal convictions against mitigating factors such as how long the illegal immigrant has been in the country, how old the crimes are and how much their families would suffer if they are detained or deported.

Mr. Mayorkas also said being in the country illegally is not a sufficient reason to be deported.

“The fact an individual is a removable noncitizen therefore should not alone be the basis of an enforcement action against them,” he told agents and officers. “We will use our discretion and focus our enforcement resources in a more targeted way. Justice and our country's well-being require it.”

Detainers used to be routine. ICE would ask law enforcement agencies to turn over illegal immigrants once they completed their prison or jail time.

Over the past decade or so, the practice became controversial. Many jurisdictions, sometimes prodded by court rulings, adopted sanctuary policies and refused to cooperate with detainers.

During the Obama and Trump administrations, ICE battled those sanctuary jurisdictions and said they were releasing dangerous criminals.

Now, with ICE canceling detainers, it's states that say federal authorities are forcing the release of dangerous criminals.

ICE declined to comment on its decision, citing the ongoing legal battle. It's not clear why Fuerta-Padilla, the hit-and-run driver, didn't meet Mr. Mayorkas' deportation threshold.

Authorities said Fuerta-Padilla was driving drunk at 1:30 on a Sunday afternoon when his Dodge pickup truck smashed into a Mazda driven by 19-year-old Adrienne Sophia Exum. She wasn't wearing a seat belt and her door wasn't shut, and the impact ejected her from her car. She was pronounced dead at the scene.

Fuerte-Padilla, who is from Mexico, tried to run away, but an off-duty officer chased him down.

Ms. Vaughan said even under the Obama administration, Fuerte-Padilla's case and those of the other four would have been priorities for ICE.

"Anyone reading these rap sheets would say of course these people should be removed, and there shouldn't be any hair-splitting on whether they are an aggravated felon, how much time they served, whether they're contributing to the community," she said.

Texas says the case of Jose Godoy Vasquez is another example of a canceled detainer. According to the state's law enforcement criminal history database, Vasquez, a Guatemalan, has a string of convictions starting with drunken driving in 2013 and then for drug possession and domestic violence from 2019 to 2021.

His sentence runs through 2025. ICE had a detainer request on Vasquez but told Texas last month that it was canceling the detainer under the new priorities.

Another case involved a man named Nay Thar. According to state records, Thar, from Thailand, was convicted of drug possession in 2017, drunken driving and fleeing police in 2018, and sneaking contraband into prison in 2020.

State records indicate he was released this month.

The Justice Department tried to block Texas from introducing the emails from ICE detailing the cancellations.

For one thing, federal lawyers said, Texas submitted the exhibits too late. The lawyers also called the emails "pointless" to the scope of the case because ICE already acknowledged it was cutting some people free based on Mr. Mayorkas' rules.

Federal attorneys tried to block Tom Homan, who served as acting ICE director in the Trump administration, from testifying on behalf of Texas.

The Justice Department said Mr. Homan left the agency years ago, before Mr. Mayorkas' deportation limits were in place, so he had no firsthand knowledge to deliver to the court. He is, however, an outspoken opponent of the more relaxed policies that the Biden administration has adopted.

"Mr. Homan's opinions are not the product of reliable principles or methods, but simply the instincts of a man with strongly held views on the proper 'solution' to illegal immigration," the government argued in its brief to Judge Drew B. Tipton.

	<p>For good measure, the Justice Department also said Mr. Homan's views "appear to be based on inadequate facts."</p> <p>Ms. Vaughan said it was "almost comical" how vehemently the Biden team was fighting to keep Mr. Homan, a 30-year ICE veteran, away from the courtroom.</p> <p>"They're trying to portray him as some ignorant gadfly," she said. "They probably are very concerned about it. It shows me it's not enough to rebut his testimony; they have to keep him from testifying. That's how concerned they are about this."</p> <p>Judge Tipton on Tuesday sided with Texas on both issues. He agreed to allow the state's witness list and evidence, including the emails about canceled detainees.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 US rotates troops to NATO battle group
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/31/us-rotates-troops-to-nato-battle-group-equipment-ii/
GIST	<p>As Russia continues to threaten Ukraine with troops along the border, the U.S. military on Sunday sent fresh troops to a NATO battle group based in neighboring Poland made up of troops from Croatia, Romania and the United Kingdom.</p> <p>U.S. officials are calling the mission "a pre-planned, normal rotation of forces" and said it was the 10th rotation of American troops in support of NATO's Enhanced Foreign Presence. But the move is likely to annoy the Kremlin, which has made a broad pullback of U.S. and allied troops from Poland and other states on its borders one of its prime demands for resolving the conflict.</p> <p>The U.S. contingent of the Enhanced Forward Presence Battlegroup-Poland will be the 1st Battalion, 185th Infantry Regiment. It is replacing the 3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment. Both battalions belong to the 81st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, made up of National Guard units located in Washington state, Oregon, and California, according to U.S. Army officials in Europe.</p> <p>More than 200 pieces of heavy combat equipment from the battalion are being off-loaded at the Polish port of Gdynia, officials said.</p> <p>On Friday, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Army Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the U.S. remains committed to its NATO allies in the face of any Russian actions in Ukraine.</p> <p>"Any Russian attack or further incursion into Ukraine would not only ignite conflict, it would also violate the bedroom principles of national sovereignty, territorial integrity and self-determination," Mr. Austin told reporters at the Pentagon. "This is something that we're taking very seriously both as a strong partner of Ukraine and as one of 30 members of NATO."</p> <p>President Biden has already put some 8,500 U.S. troops on high alert for possible deployment to eastern Europe as the crisis with Russia continues to play out.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Myanmar junta warns protesters: no rally
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/31/myanmars-junta-threatens-protesters-planning-coup-anniversary-action
GIST	<p>Myanmar's military junta has threatened sedition and terrorism charges against anyone who shuts their business, claps or bang pots on Tuesday, as it tries to stamp out any protests planned to mark the one-year anniversary of the coup.</p>

The military, which ousted the democratically elected government of [Aung San Suu Kyi](#) on 1 February 2021, continues to face defiant opposition including peaceful protests and an armed resistance.

On Tuesday, activists plan to hold a “silent strike” and have called for members of the public to stay at home between 10am and 4pm. At the end of the strike, people will clap or bang pots, an act that is traditionally thought to drive out evil spirits, and which is often used as a form of protest against the military.

The junta has warned the public not to participate in such protests, announcing in junta-controlled media that people who do so will face a variety of legal charges. Over the past week, business owners have been sent notices from local administrators, reiterating such threats, and warning their property could be confiscated. They have been required to sign a document to pledge their agreement.

Some shop owners who had told customers that their businesses will be closed on 1 February have already been arrested, according to local media outlet the Irrawaddy.

Many businesses are proposing getting around the military threats by dramatically raising prices, opening only for a few hours and closing for “lunch break”, or keeping their store open but not selling items.

A new generation of activists

Aung Kaung Sett, president of Yangon University Student Union, who led mass protests in Yangon in the wake of the coup and is now in hiding, said the public would not abandon the struggle for democracy.

“There is no turning back now. We live or we die,” he said. “The revolution must continue, whatever it takes.”

While military violence means it is no longer safe to hold large street rallies, and leaders such as Aung San Suu Kyi remain in prison, new forms of protests continue, led by a new generation of activists. “There are guerrilla protests led by young people, especially students, poets and activists, across everywhere in Myanmar,” Aung Kaung Sett said.

He said the coup had dramatically changed public opinion of the Myanmar military, which is known as the Tatmadaw. “People are beginning to feel the same way now as those who had faced oppression by the Myanmar military in the past,” he said, citing the brutal crackdown on Rohingya Muslims in 2017, and atrocities committed against other ethnic minorities.

There was previously little sympathy towards minorities within Myanmar, but attitudes have shifted as the public has united in opposition to the military.

The military has announced it will hold market festivals and a cycling contest in both Yangon and Mandalay from Monday until Wednesday, in an attempt to crowd the streets on the day of the Silent Strike and project an image of normalcy.

However, one year on from the coup, the country is in a state of turmoil. Public services, such as health and education, have collapsed because many medical and teaching staff refuse to work in junta-controlled facilities and so are operating in the community. The economy is failing, with the UN estimating the crisis will have driven almost half the population into poverty in 2022. According to the World Food Programme, the cost of a basic food basket was almost [a third higher in October 2021](#) when compared with the month prior to the coup. Fuel prices have surged more than 70%.

The military has also [inflicted extreme violence](#) to suppress opposition, burning villages, launching airstrikes, carrying out massacres and blocking aid to civilians. Since the coup, 1,499 people have been killed, according to [the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners](#), which tracks deaths and arrests. At least 11,801 people have been arrested. There are widespread reports of torture within detention facilities.

Many young people have fled to the jungle and resorted to taking up arms and forming people's defence forces. Among them is Costa, 21, who, prior to the coup, was studying International Relations at Yangon University. She is now in charge of managing finances for a battalion of the Karenni National Defence Force in Kayah state.

"We will continue to ask for what we want: to abolish the 2008 constitution [which guaranteed the military huge powers, even during the governments of Aung San Suu Kyi], restore democracy and end dictatorship, even if it takes 10 years," she said.

Worsening conflict between the junta and its opponents has forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes, especially in the south-east and north-west of the country.

As of 27 December, an estimated [320,900 people remained internally displaced](#) across Myanmar, according to the United Nations. This is in addition to the 340,000 people who were already displaced before the coup.

David Carden, the head of UN OCHA Myanmar, said the people of Myanmar faced "an unprecedented political, human rights and humanitarian crisis that is now touching all corners of the country, posing grave protection risks for civilians, limiting access to services and driving deeper food insecurity".

Many of the people who were displaced were living in the open or sheltering in the jungle. Humanitarian access remains severely restricted, Carden added.

International efforts to ease the crisis have been criticised by activists as inadequate. Ismail Wolff, regional director of the group Fortify Rights, described the response as "ineffective and incompetent".

"The [UN] security council must take the lead by passing a binding resolution enforcing an arms embargo on the Myanmar military ... More pressure should also be applied to Thailand and India to authorise a comprehensive cross-border humanitarian aid effort," Wolff said.

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HEADLINE	01/31 GoFundMe Canada truckers nears \$10M
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/world/gofundme-for-canadian-truckers-approaches-10m-raising-more-than-canadian-political-parties-last-quarter
GIST	<p>The GoFundMe page to support the "Freedom Convoy" of Canadian truckers was approaching \$10 million as of Monday evening, which is more money than the major federal political parties of Canada raised during the last quarter of 2021.</p> <p>"Our current government is implementing rules and mandates that are destroying the foundation of our businesses, industries and livelihoods," read the convoy's GoFundMe page.</p> <p>"We are a peaceful country that has helped protect nations across the globe from tyrannical governments who oppressed their people, and now it seems it is happening here."</p> <p>The federal government mandated that Canadian truckers had to be fully vaccinated by Jan. 15 if they want to avoid a 14-day quarantine when they cross the border from the United States.</p> <p>The GoFundMe was started Jan. 14 by Tamara Lich, who is also secretary of the Western separatist Maverick Party. The fund says the money will go to pay for fuel as well as for food and lodgings for the participating truckers.</p> <p>By comparison, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's reigning Liberal Party of Canada raked in \$3.7 million during the last quarter of 2021, according to public records with Elections Canada. The opposing Conservative Party of Canada collected a little more than \$3 million during the same period.</p>

	<p>Among the other parties represented in the Canadian House of Commons, the New Democratic Party raised \$1.8 million, the Green Party of Canada raised about \$800,000, and Bloc Québécois raised a little more than \$150,000.</p> <p>A GoFundMe spokesperson told Fox News Digital on Monday that the organizers had provided a detailed plan on how the funds would be spent, and that \$1 million had been withdrawn for their effort. The spokesperson added that the company will continue working with organizers regarding the release of remaining funds.</p> <p>The Freedom Convoy of truckers left Vancouver for Ottawa on Jan. 23 to protest the federal government's vaccine mandates for cross-border truckers and is calling for an end to coronavirus restrictions. The convoy reached Ottawa this weekend and was joined by thousands of other Canadians protesting the mandates.</p> <p>Trudeau, who was moved to a secret location as the protesters descended on the capital over the weekend, condemned the protesters on Monday and accused them of "hateful rhetoric."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Scientists: silenced on lab leak theory
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/politics/scientists-speak-out-on-being-silenced-when-raising-concerns-about-lab-leak-theory
GIST	<p>Some scientists have begun speaking out about efforts to silence researchers who raised concerns about the possibility that COVID-19 could have originated in a Chinese lab.</p> <p>"It shot from every direction from people who we now know were actually thinking exactly the same thing but have chosen to say the opposite, which is extraordinary," Australian Dr. Nikolai Petrovsky, a Flinders University Medicine professor, told Fox News of the backlash he received for voicing concerns that the pandemic may have originated in a lab.</p> <p>Petrovsky was not alone, according to reporting from Fox News' Benjamin Hall, who spoke with scientists from Israel, the U.S., Australia, Germany, the U.K., Australia and Germany. The scientists told Fox News that they received backlash and resistance to getting their work published, even from those who quietly believed in the possibility of the "lab-leak theory."</p> <p>"It's taken two years for that to finally come out and be exposed," Petrovsky said.</p> <p>The scientists say that there was a top-down effort aimed at protecting the scientific community from negative public attention, with fears spreading among scientists that a public realization that the pandemic may have spread due to gain-of-function research in a lab could hamper future experiments.</p> <p>Many in the scientific community who attempted to speak out about COVID-19's origins were labeled conspiracy theorists in the media and by fellow scientists early on in the pandemic, even though the possibility of human error has now gained renewed attention from experts.</p> <p>The scientists expressed fear to Fox News that the silencing of such voices has led to little change, with gain-of-function research continuing both in the U.S. and abroad despite growing calls for international regulation.</p> <p>But the scientists expressed outrage that there was more of an effort by China, some scientists and media to cover up how the pandemic may have started, leaving little hope for a push for stricter regulation.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 High cost of childcare strains families
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/childcare-costs-strain-families/

GIST	<p>Boston — The soaring cost of child care is one of the most pressing issues facing families nationwide. The annual cost of child care rivals the cost of a college education in many states, according to a recent analysis from the Economic Policy Institute.</p> <p>Except for Washington, D.C., Massachusetts has the country's most-expensive child care. For a 4-year-old, that cost averages \$15,000 per year. It's almost \$21,000 for an infant. By government standards, only 5% of Massachusetts families can afford infant care.</p> <p>"It doesn't work for anybody," said Lauren Cook, who runs the Ellis Early Learning Center, a Boston institution since 1885. "Nobody wins. Everyone suffers, literally everybody."</p> <p>Ellis Early Learning Center, a nationally accredited nonprofit, provides childcare for 270 kids and has a waiting list more than double its enrollment. Tuition is as high as \$30,000, but without donations, the center would close.</p> <p>"We lose money virtually on every child we serve," Cook told CBS news.</p> <p>Charging families more for the care, Cook said, "would break families."</p> <p>At Ellis, two-thirds of the kids have subsidized tuition based on low family income. Without that subsidy, Aleathia Graham's child care for her 3-year-old Aryelle would cost more than her rent.</p> <p>"You're putting that much money into daycare, then what am I gonna have saved up? How am I gonna afford a house one day," the social worker told CBS News.</p> <p>Child care costs Cassandra D'Alesandro, an architect, almost half her after-tax income.</p> <p>"I felt like I should scream, cry and vomit all at the same time," she told CBS News. "You have this repetitive question — is it worth it?"</p> <p>For years, advocates have pleaded for the government to invest in early learning, including free child care for 3 and 4 year olds.</p> <p>"We don't look at parents and ask them how they're going to afford the cost of their education for their 8-year-old," Lauren Kennedy, co-founder of Neighborhood Villages, told CBS News. "Why should they bear the full responsibility for the cost of their 2-year-old?"</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Russia written response to US
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russia-responds-us-state-department/
GIST	<p>The U.S. has received a written follow-up response from Russia, according to a State Department spokesperson. But the Biden administration isn't revealing what Moscow said.</p> <p>The follow-up document comes after the U.S. responded to a list of Russian demands, amid Russia's military buildup near Ukraine.</p> <p>"It would be unproductive to negotiate in public, so we'll leave it up to Russia if they want to discuss their response," the State Department spokesperson said. "We remain fully committed to dialogue to address these issues and will continue to consult closely with our allies and partners, including Ukraine."</p> <p>The news of Russia's written response was first reported by The Washington Post.</p> <p>Last week, the U.S. responded to Russia, emphasizing Ukraine's sovereignty while suggesting potential for progress in areas like arms control in Europe and ways to increase transparency and stability.</p>

	<p>The U.S. and its NATO allies have warned for weeks that President Vladimir Putin could use the forces he has built up near the Ukraine border to launch a new invasion of the country as soon as February, though Putin's government denies any such intentions.</p> <p>Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov is set to hold a phone call with his U.S. counterpart, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, according to the Russian ministry.</p> <p>The United Nations Security Council met Monday, with U.S. ambassador to the U.N. Linda Thomas-Greenfield saying the hope is that Russia continues "along the route of diplomacy and find a solution — a way forward so that Ukraine can feel comfortable and secure in its own borders."</p> <p>Meanwhile, Ukraine has approved President Biden's pick of Bridget Brink for U.S. ambassador to Ukraine. While Brink has been the frontrunner for months, it's unclear what delayed the administration in finalizing the pick and in requesting Ukraine's approval. Mr. Biden has not yet announced his selection.</p> <p>Mr. Biden spoke with Ukraine's president last week, and has been consulting with European allies.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Moderna obtains full approval for vaccine
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/moderna-announces-full-us-approval-covid-19-vaccine-82580687
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON -- U.S. health regulators on Monday granted full approval to Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine, a shot that's already been given to tens of millions of Americans since its emergency authorization over a year ago.</p> <p>The action by the Food and Drug Administration means the agency has completed the same rigorous, time-consuming review of Moderna's shot as dozens of other long-established vaccines.</p> <p>The decision was bolstered by real-world evidence from the more than 200 million doses administered in the U.S. since the FDA cleared the shot in December 2020. The FDA granted full approval of Pfizer's vaccine last August.</p> <p>Public health advocates initially hoped the regulatory distinction would boost public confidence in the shots. But there was no discernable bump in vaccinations after the Pfizer approval, which was heavily promoted by President Joe Biden and other federal officials. Still, regulators said Monday they hoped the extra endorsement would encourage more people to get vaccinated.</p> <p>More than 211 million Americans, or 63% of the total population, are fully vaccinated. About 86 million people have gotten a booster dose. Vaccinations peaked last spring at more than 3 million per day, and now average less than 750,000 per day. The pace of vaccinations briefly spiked following news of the omicron variant in December but has since slowed again.</p> <p>The FDA reviewed months of additional follow-up data submitted by Moderna to confirm the vaccine's effectiveness against COVID-19. The FDA also analyzed and kept watch for serious side effects that have proved to be very rare. The vaccine includes a warning about a rare type of heart inflammation that mostly occurs in young men following the second dose. Most cases are mild and resolve quickly.</p> <p>Additionally, FDA reviewed the company's manufacturing process and facilities.</p> <p>"The public can be assured that this vaccine was approved in keeping with the FDA's rigorous scientific standards," said Dr. Peter Marks, FDA's top vaccine regulator, in a statement.</p> <p>With full approval, Moderna will now market the vaccine under the brand name, Spikevax. It is the first FDA-approved product for the Cambridge, Massachusetts-based company.</p>

In the U.S., Moderna is used only by adults, for initial vaccination and as a half-dose booster. The company said last fall that FDA had delayed deciding whether to clear the shots for 12- to 17-year-olds as it examined the heart inflammation risk.

Johnson & Johnson has not yet applied for full approval of its COVID-19 vaccine.

Also Monday, Novavax Inc. formally requested FDA authorization of a different type of COVID-19 vaccine, in hopes of becoming the fourth U.S. option.

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HEADLINE	01/31 Nigeria troubled north: dozens killed
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/dozens-killed-days-attacks-nigerias-troubled-north-82583214
GIST	<p>ABUJA, Nigeria -- Dozens of civilians and security personnel have been killed in attacks by gunmen in three states in Nigeria's troubled northern region, authorities said Monday.</p> <p>The armed men that killed dozens in the northwest and central regions targeted local communities including some of their former members who had laid down their arms, according to the police and government officials.</p> <p>In Katsina state, "the gunmen came in over 200 motorcycles" and invaded Ilela village which is just 77 kilometers (47 miles) from the state capital, police spokesman Gambo Isah told The Associated Press.</p> <p>"It was a serious fight between the repentant and unrepentant bandits," Isah told AP. "They ganged up from everywhere against the repentant bandits ... 12 persons were confirmed dead."</p> <p>In Niger state which neighbors Nigeria's capital, Abuja, authorities said many people including 11 security personnel were killed on Saturday when "terrorists" overran a security outpost and attacked neighboring villages in Shiroro local government area.</p> <p>The attackers numbered more than 100, according to Niger State Governor Abubakar Sani Bello who described the incident as "unfortunate and regrettable."</p> <p>Eleven persons were also killed in Kaduna state early Sunday morning when assailants attacked the Kurmin Masara village in Zangon Kataf local government area, a state official said in a statement.</p> <p>"According to the reports, troops of the Nigerian Air Force Special Forces who responded to distress calls from the area also fell into an ambush as they mobilized to the scene of the attack," said Samuel Aruwan, Kaduna State Commissioner for Internal Security and Home Affairs. "Over 30 houses and properties were burned in the attack."</p> <p>He said authorities have been deployed in the area to arrest the assailants who mostly consist of young men from the Fulani ethnic group, who had traditionally worked as nomadic cattle herders and are caught up in a decades-long conflict with Hausa farming communities over access to water and grazing land.</p> <p>Nigerian authorities recently declared the gunmen operating in more than 100 groups as terrorists but the situation has not noticeably improved, especially for the remote communities where security operatives are outnumbered and outgunned.</p> <p>Saturday's attack in Niger state "would have been unsuccessful" if villagers ... "had alerted the security agencies when they noticed movements of the terrorists towards the town," the Niger state governor said, blaming the residents for the killings of their community members.</p> <p>But locals themselves have been killed or abducted in the past for simply informing security operatives about the movement of the armed groups.</p>

	<p>In addition to women and children, local authorities have also been targeted in the violence across northern Nigeria. The chairman of Shiroro LGA in Niger told AP Monday that his relatives including his elder brother and children have been held for more than a month because he has been talking to reporters about the attacks.</p> <p>“We have really run out of patience with the terrorists,” Niger Governor Bello admitted while condemning the latest violence via a statement issued by his office. “We’ll use every means possible to bring an end to these incessant bloody attacks on innocent people.”</p> <p>In a separate incident, five Islamic extremists were killed over the weekend in Nigeria's northeast where the militants have waged an insurgency against the government, according to the Nigerian army.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 African Union suspends Burkina Faso
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/african-union-suspends-burkina-faso-coup-week-82577165
GIST	<p>OUAGADOUGOU, Burkina Faso -- The African Union has suspended Burkina Faso until constitutional order is restored in the West African country, the organization announced Monday in a tweet.</p> <p>The suspension of Burkina Faso comes a week after mutinous soldiers ousted democratically elected President Roch Marc Christian Kabore in a coup, citing his inability to stem the violence from Islamic extremists.</p> <p>The 15-nation West African group ECOWAS already had suspended Burkina Faso last week, making it the third nation in the regional bloc — after Mali and Guinea — to be punished for military takeovers in a year and a half. The suspensions mean the countries cannot participate in any meetings or decision-making, officials said.</p> <p>While no sanctions have been imposed on Burkina Faso, a joint delegation with ECOWAS and the head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel, Mahamat Saleh Annadif, arrived in the capital, Ouagadougou on Monday.</p> <p>The mediators urged the military junta to prepare a transition to constitutional rule if they wanted to have international support, though a specific time period was not given, according to two officials who spoke on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the matter.</p> <p>A small group from the delegation also visited Kabore, the ousted president who hadn't been seen or heard from since being detained last week by the junta, the officials said.</p> <p>An ECOWAS summit is scheduled on Thursday in Ghana to discuss the situations in Burkina Faso and Mali, which is also under harsh economic and travel sanctions after its coup leader failed to organize an election within 18 months.</p> <p>On Monday afternoon, Burkina Faso's junta announced that the leader of the Patriotic Movement for Safeguarding and Restoration, Lt. Col. Paul Henri Sandaogo Damiba, is the country's new president. Reading an announcement on state television, Lt. Col. Cyprien Kabore, a spokesman for the junta, also said the head of the intelligence unit and the army's chief of staff had been fired but didn't say who was replacing them.</p> <p>Talks with Damiba and ECOWAS began Saturday when a West African military delegation arrived. The junta has said that Kabore has not adequately addressed extremist violence in Burkina Faso that has killed thousands and displaced more than 1.5 million people.</p> <p>Speaking to the nation last week for the first since seizing power, Damiba said he would restore security and order and unite the country. He warned that the new regime would not tolerate betrayal.</p>

	<p>Also Monday, the long-awaited trial on the killing of Thomas Sankara, Burkina Faso's influential leftist leader who was killed more than three decades ago, was suspended as a result of the coup. Prosper Farama, one of the lawyers for the Sankara family, said the trial was paused until the constitution is reestablished, which could be a few days.</p> <p>The president of the military tribunal said the trial would resume 24 hours after the constitution was reestablished.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Mali's junta expels French ambassador
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/malis-junta-expels-french-ambassador-tensions-mount-82580040
GIST	<p>BAMAKO, Mali -- Mali's ruling junta on Monday ordered the French ambassador to leave the West African country, accusing France of undermining its legitimacy amid mounting tensions between Mali and its African neighbors and European partners.</p> <p>The action puts into question a French-led anti-terrorist military operation present in the region at the request of Malian leaders. It also comes amid growing European concerns about the presence of Russian mercenaries in Mali, a former French colony.</p> <p>A French diplomat said the French government took note of Mali's decision to expel the ambassador, and reiterated France's commitment to the stabilization and development of the Sahel region, without elaborating. The diplomat spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive diplomatic situation.</p> <p>This latest episode in the diplomatic crisis between Mali and its foreign partners comes days after the Malian government ordered Danish soldiers deployed in the French-led Takuba military operation to leave Mali. Also earlier this month, regional group ECOWAS imposed sanctions on Mali, and Mali's leaders expelled its representative from the country.</p> <p>Tensions between Mali and its European and regional allies have been mounting in recent weeks, as Mali's interim leader Col. Assimi Goita has delayed elections until 2026, solidified his control and showed reluctance to uphold Mali's international agreements.</p> <p>The Malian government summoned French Ambassador Joel Meyer on Monday and said he had 72 hours to leave the country, according to a Malian government statement announced on state television.</p> <p>"This measure follows the hostile and outrageous comments made recently by the French Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs and the recurrence of such comments by the French authorities with regard to the Malian authorities," the statement added.</p> <p>The statement didn't specify which French comments it was referring to.</p> <p>French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said last week that Mali's junta is "illegitimate and takes irresponsible measures." French government ministers have said in recent days they want to keep troops in Mali, but have called for discussions with Mali's leaders and regional powers on the conditions for them to stay.</p> <p>Malian Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop said on Malian television Monday night that the ambassador would be welcome to return if the French government clarifies its position toward the transitional government.</p> <p>He said unspecified comments by French officials were "unacceptable" because they "questioned the legality and legitimacy" of Mali's current leaders. "This is a difficult situation, because you cannot be accredited to authorities that you yourselves don't recognize," he said.</p>

	<p>“France is the only country in a posture of direct attack against the legality and legitimacy of the transitional authorities,” he said. “We have a dispute on a political level with France, that doesn't concern French citizens or French businesses here, and French people remain welcome in Mali. We remain open to dialogue with France.”</p> <p>Since a second coup in May 2021 and the arrival of Prime Minister Choguel Maiga, tension has grown between the transitional authorities in Mali and the French government. The situation worsened after some European countries, including France, expressed concern that Mali's interim government has accepted the presence of Russian security contractors from the Wagner Group on its territory.</p> <p>Last month, the EU slapped sanctions on eight people and three oil companies linked to Wagner, which is accused of rights abuses in the Central African Republic, Libya and Syria.</p> <p>Mali has been battling an Islamic insurgency in the north since 2012, and in 2013 France intervened to stop jihadists who had seized swaths of the sprawling country, also at the request of Malian leaders.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 US expels Venezuela migrants to Colombia
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/us-expels-venezuelan-migrants-colombia-covid-powers-82588999
GIST	<p>BOGOTA, Colombia -- The Biden administration said Monday that it has begun expelling Venezuelan migrants to Colombia without a chance to seek asylum after entering the United States from Mexico, its latest use of pandemic-related authority.</p> <p>The development also was confirmed by Colombian officials.</p> <p>The U.S. Department of Homeland Security said it will expel Venezuelans to Colombia “on a regular basis,” without elaborating on the frequency. They will be limited to Venezuelans who previously resided in Colombia, it said.</p> <p>The first two Venezuelans were expelled Thursday after entering the U.S. illegally from Mexico, U.S. and Colombian officials said. Colombia's immigration agency said they were on a commercial flight.</p> <p>Homeland Security said it acted after discussions with the Colombian government. Colombia's Foreign Affairs Ministry did not immediately respond to questions.</p> <p>Colombia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said a meeting was held in December to discuss the possibility of receiving Venezuelan deportees who had already been granted temporary residency in Colombia.</p> <p>It said there was no specific figure on how many Venezuelans would be sent to Colombia, but both sides agreed that the operation would be conducted “with the coordination” of both countries and “following health and safety protocols.”</p> <p>The move is a response to a rising number of Venezuelans seeking refuge in the United States as their South American country unravels.</p> <p>In December, U.S. authorities encountered Venezuelans crossing the Mexican border illegally nearly 25,000 times, the second highest nationality after Mexicans. The number was more than double that of only three months earlier and up from only about 200 a year previously.</p> <p>Crossings were concentrated in the Border Patrol's Yuma, Arizona, and Del Rio, Texas, sectors. About 15,000 migrants, mostly Haitians, assembled in Del Rio, a town of 35,000 people, in September. Venezuelans typically arrive by plane in Mexicali, Mexico, before crossing at nearby Yuma.</p>

	<p>Mexico began requiring visas of Venezuelans on Jan. 21, following similar restrictions imposed last year on Brazilians and Ecuadorians in response to large numbers of migrants headed to the U.S. border.</p> <p>It remains unclear if the travel restrictions will lead to a drop in Venezuelan migrants reaching the U.S. border. The number of Ecuadorian migrants plummeted last year under the new visa requirement, while the flow of Brazilians has continued.</p> <p>Since March 2020, the U.S. has expelled migrants at the Mexican border without an opportunity to seek asylum under what is known as Title 42 authority, named for a 1944 public law that was invoked to contain spread of the coronavirus.</p> <p>Mexico has agreed to accept migrants from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, but those from other countries are often allowed to remain in the United States to seek asylum because the U.S. lacks detention space or resources to expel them under Title 42 authority.</p> <p>Olga Byrne, director of immigration matters for the International Rescue Committee, criticized the action.</p> <p>"Despite commitments announced by the U.S. Administration in the first 100 days, harmful policies like Title 42 are still in place more than one year after taking office," she said in a statement. "Title 42 expulsions deprive asylum seekers of due process, instead sending them back to dangerous conditions, similar if not worse to those they escaped. In certain cases, they send them to third countries, like Colombia, that for years have stepped up to welcome Venezuelan asylum seekers."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Honduras to strengthen ties w/Taiwan
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/honduras-official-maintain-relations-taiwan-82589003
GIST	<p>TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras -- Honduras will continue strengthening ties with Taiwan and establishing a diplomatic relationship with China is not a priority for Honduran President Xiomara Castro, the country's new foreign affairs minister said Monday.</p> <p>Eduardo Enrique Reina said maintaining relationships with Honduras' historical partners is important. The message from Reina at a news conference Monday runs counter to some comments by Castro, who has spoken of establishing a relationship with mainland China.</p> <p>Honduras is one of the few remaining Central American allies of Taiwan. China has moved to isolate Taiwan and most recently Nicaragua swapped Taiwan for China, even turning over Taiwan's embassy.</p> <p>Reina said the issue had been under evaluation during the transition period after Castro won election in November. He said Castro's team weighed the benefit that Honduras had received from a good relationship with Taiwan and decided that for now there was no reason to look for alternatives.</p> <p>China claims self-ruled Taiwan as part of its territory. Taiwan's vice president attended Castro's inauguration.</p> <p>China has been poaching Taiwan's diplomatic allies over the past few years, reducing the number of countries that recognize the democratic island as a sovereign nation. China is against Taiwan representing itself in global forums or in diplomacy.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Midwest braces for major winter storm
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/midwest-braces-major-snowfall-ice-roads-forecast/story?id=82577470
GIST	<p>The Midwest is bracing for a storm that could bring major snowfall and leave dangerous ice on roadways.</p> <p>The storm is set to strike Tuesday through Thursday. A winter storm watch has been issued from Colorado to Michigan, including Kansas City, Missouri, St. Louis, Chicago, Indianapolis and Detroit.</p>

	<p>More than 1 foot of snow is possible between Chicago and Indianapolis and also near Detroit.</p> <p>Six to 12 inches of snow is expected for parts of the Rockies, as well as from Oklahoma and the Texas panhandle into Kansas, Missouri, Illinois and Michigan.</p> <p>This storm is expected to drop freezing rain and sleet -- leaving dangerous, icy roads -- in a huge part of the country, especially in Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana and Ohio.</p> <p>By Thursday morning the wind chill -- what temperature it feels like -- is forecast to drop to 14 degrees in St. Louis, 0 degrees in Chicago, minus 25 degrees in Minneapolis, minus 17 degrees in Amarillo, Texas, and minus 16 in Denver.</p> <p>Meanwhile, by the end of the week the Northeast will be thawing out, with temperatures rising to the mid 40's in New York City and Boston.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 US, Russia spar over Ukraine at UN
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/security-council-adjourns-action-us-russia-spar-ukraine/story?id=82581233
GIST	<p>After months of tensions over Russia's massive troop buildup on Ukraine's borders, the United Nations Security Council met Monday to discuss the situation for the first time -- adjourning after over two hours of open debate.</p> <p>The meeting didn't yield any action or even a joint statement, but ambassadors from the U.S. and Russia sparred in dueling remarks, trading blame for escalating the crisis.</p> <p>Russian leader Vladimir Putin has amassed over 100,000 troops and heavy equipment and weaponry on three sides of Ukraine, including in Russian-annexed Crimea and in Belarus, Kyiv's northern neighbor and a close Kremlin ally.</p> <p>At first, Russia, backed by China, tried to block the session from moving forward by calling a vote among Security Council's 15 member states. Russia and China opposed it, three countries abstained, but ten voted to move ahead with it.</p> <p>"You heard from our Russian colleagues that we're calling for this meeting to make you all feel uncomfortable. Imagine how uncomfortable you would be if you had 100,000 troops sitting on your border in the way that these troops are sitting on the border with Ukraine," said U.S. ambassador to the U.N. Linda Thomas-Greenfield. "This is not about antics. It's not about rhetoric. It's not about 'U.S. and Russia.' What this is about is the peace and security of one of our member states."</p> <p>In her remarks, she accused Russia of "the largest -- hear me clearly -- mobilization of troops in Europe in decades" and threatening military action should its concerns about Ukraine joining NATO and NATO's troop deployments in Eastern European member states not be addressed.</p> <p>"If Russia further invades Ukraine, none of us will be able to say we didn't see it coming, and the consequences will be horrific," she added.</p> <p>But Russia's envoy again denied that the Kremlin is planning to attack its neighbor, a former Soviet state and now a growing democracy -- telling the Security Council there is "no proof confirming such a serious accusation whatsoever," defending troop movements within Russia's borders as a domestic issue, and then denying there are 100,000 as U.S. and other Western officials have said.</p> <p>"They themselves are whipping up tensions and rhetoric and are provoking escalation," Russian Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia said of the U.S. and its NATO allies. "The discussions about a threat of war</p>

is provocative in and of itself. You are almost calling for this. You want it to happen. You're waiting for it to happen."

Thomas-Greenfield requested to speak again to respond, saying, "I cannot let the false equivalency go unchecked, so I feel I must respond. ... The threats of aggression on the border of Ukraine -- yes on its border -- is provocative. Our recognition of the facts on the ground is not provocative."

Ukraine -- which is not a member of the Security Council, but was invited to participate -- urged Russia to respect its "sovereign right" to choose which countries it partners with.

"Ukraine will not bow to threats aimed at weakening Ukraine, undermining its economic and financial stability, and inciting public frustration. This will not happen. And the Kremlin must remember that Ukraine is ready to defend itself," Ukrainian Ambassador Sergiy Kyslytsya told the council.

In a sign of their increasing alignment, China was the only country to back Russia's effort to squash the public meeting. Its ambassador Zhang Jun said they oppose "microphone diplomacy of public confrontation" and believed the open discussion of the issue would add "fuel to the tension."

While the session didn't yield any results, it marks the start of another week of diplomacy between Russia and the U.S. and its allies over Ukraine.

"Russia heard clearly a united position from the vast majority of the council, and I hope that that will lead to a diplomatic solution," Thomas-Greenfield, a member of President Joe Biden's Cabinet, told reporters after the meeting.

Biden himself hailed the meeting as "a critical step in rallying the world to speak out in one voice: rejecting the use of force, calling for military de-escalation, supporting diplomacy as the best path forward."

On Tuesday, Secretary of State Antony Blinken will speak with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the State Department and Russian Foreign Ministry confirmed Monday -- the first conversation after the U.S. responding in writing last week to Russia's demands about Ukraine and NATO.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is expected to speak to Putin this week, days after the U.K. said it could deploy troops to protect NATO allies if Russia invaded Ukraine. Biden announced a similar position last week, putting 8,500 U.S. troops on "heightened alert" and adding Friday he could do so in the "near" future.

In a potential positive sign for diplomacy, Russia said some of its forces had pulled back from the border areas after a "preparedness check," according to the Russian Armed Forces' Southern Military District.

But it's not yet clear if the U.S. had confirmed any troops were withdrawn from the border region, and Thomas-Greenfield warned the U.S. has evidence Russia intends to expand its presence in Belarus to more than 30,000 troops -- putting them less than two hours north of Kyiv. Those deployments include short-range ballistic missiles, special forces, and anti-aircraft batteries, she added -- all of which Russia and Belarus have said are for military exercises.

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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	02/01 Ransomware: party almost over?
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/ransomware-is-the-party-almost-over-for-the-cyber-crooks/
GIST	Ransomware has become the biggest cybersecurity issue facing businesses, governments and the wider world today.

A series of high-profile incidents during the past year – such as the [Colonial Pipeline ransomware attack](#), the [Kaseya ransomware attack](#), a string of attacks against hospitals and healthcare, [including the Irish Healthcare Executive](#), and many others – have caused problems for millions.

Ransomware is effective because, in many cases, the victim will give into the extortion by the cyber criminals and pay the ransom, [often millions of dollars](#), to get a decryption key to restore their network. In other cases, the victims don't pay, [opting to restore the network themselves](#), a process that can take weeks or months – all the while having an impact on their business or services. Such has been the chaos caused that ransomware has even [become part of the discussion between world leaders](#) during international summits.

During the second half of 2021, law enforcement agencies around the world publicised arrests and take downs [related to ransomware groups](#) and the [dark web services](#) that allow them to operate, with suspects detained in countries including Ukraine, South Korea and Kuwait.

But as welcome as these arrests were for law enforcement agencies, many of the most notorious ransomware crews remained at large. This, in part, is because many of these cyber-criminal operations are run out of Russia – and there's a [consensus among cybersecurity experts](#) that the local authorities are willing to turn a blind eye to criminal hackers who focus their attentions on the West.

So, it was a surprise when, on January 14, Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) [announced it had detained suspected members of the REvil ransomware gang](#) operating from several regions of the country and had dismantled the group's operations.

REvil was one of the most disruptive ransomware groups of 2021. One of the high-profile campaigns they carried out included [an attack against JBS](#), which resulted in the food producer [paying a ransom of over \\$10 million](#).

The ransomware group was also blamed for an attack against Kaseya, the enterprise IT management software provider. The attack resulted in thousands of businesses around the world being disrupted – [and in many cases temporarily closed until services were back online](#), preventing people from being able to buy goods from their local supermarkets in regions ranging from Sweden to New Zealand.

But if one of the biggest, most infamous ransomware groups has suddenly found itself seemingly being taken down by law enforcement, does this mean the game is up for ransomware?

Certainly, [members of underground forums have taken note](#), with some expressing worries that it's only a matter of time before law enforcement catches up with them. "In fact, one thing is clear, those who expect that the state would protect them will be greatly disappointed," said a member of one forum. Some forum members even suggested they might move operations to a different jurisdiction, although this is unlikely to be a realistic option for many.

However, while REvil is notorious, the group had been on hiatus for several months prior to the FSB's action – meaning that while arrests of cyber criminals are welcomed, some doubt if this will have any significant impact on other major ransomware crews. It's also not clear whether Russia's sudden interest in pursuing ransomware crime will continue; some industry experts have suggested that Russia's engagement may be linked to its broader geopolitical agenda.

[According to the White House](#), one of the suspects arrested as part of the REvil raids was the person behind the Colonial Pipeline ransomware attack, the incident that led to gas shortages on the US east coast. The attack – [which saw Colonial paying a \\$5 million ransom](#) – wasn't by REvil, but DarkSide, a separate but closely associated ransomware group.

This situation illustrates one of the issues that complicates disrupting ransomware – the groups that operate them don't act like regular companies with clear job titles. Instead, the different groups can overlap and individual cyber criminals can move between different outfits.

If one group gets taken down by law enforcement, remaining ransomware developers and other members of the operation can take their skills elsewhere, aiding existing ransomware affiliate schemes or helping to set up a new one.

[Ransomware-as-a-service affiliate schemes](#) allow cyber criminals who want to conduct ransomware attacks, without having to build ransomware themselves, to get in on the action – usually with the developers of the product taking a cut of the profits made from ransoms.

Over the years, the people who run the affiliate schemes have come and gone, either after being shut down, taking a temporary hiatus, [sometimes returning after a rebrand](#), or in some cases just retiring from the ransomware business. But for those who want to be part of a ransomware-as-a-service scheme, there still are plenty of options available as [new operations continue to appear](#).

So, while arrests and take downs are effective tools against those developing ransomware, the demand from those lower down the chain, combined with skilled ransomware authors taking their skills to new operations, likely means that new ransomware operations will continue to emerge, even after take downs.

It's unlikely the latest round of arrests will suddenly stop ransomware for good. But they do show ransomware groups and the cyber criminals around them that they aren't immune from being tracked down and having their assets obtained and ransom demands seized, particularly as more and more arrests take place.

"It's still lucrative, so plenty of reasons to do it, it's still not particularly risky relatively, but in terms of imposing costs, the cost of doing business has gone up," says Ciaran Martin, professor of practice at the University of Oxford's Blavatnik School of Government – and former director of the UK's National Cyber Security Centre.

"Maybe they're not the major operators, maybe they're just bit-part players, but that still has an impact, and I think it still chips away a little better the sense of impunity of ransomware," he adds.

As demonstrated by dark web discussions following the arrests, action against ransomware groups can also sow doubt in the mind of those behind cyberattacks.

Not only might they be more likely to be worried about the idea of law enforcement bashing down their door, but it could plant the idea that individuals in the ransomware ecosystem can't be trusted – it could be that law enforcement has infiltrated a forum, or a prominent member has suddenly been coerced into helping the authorities with their investigation.

"The trust between the various parts of these networks has probably been eroded," says Martin.

And if there's doubt among dark web ransomware communities, that pushes up another barrier that makes campaigns that little bit more difficult to carry out.

Cyber criminals being arrested is welcome, it's something that chips away at a major cybersecurity issue facing organisations today and shows that there are potential consequences for carrying out cybercrime – but the issue of ransomware isn't suddenly going to disappear in 2022.

"It's not over by any means," says Martin. "Parts of it have got a little bit better, but it's still the pre-eminent cybersecurity issue of our time."

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SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/02/ukraine-continues-to-face-cyber.html
GIST	<p>Cybersecurity researchers on Monday said they uncovered evidence of attempted attacks by a Russia-linked hacking operation targeting a Ukrainian entity in July 2021.</p> <p>Broadcom-owned Symantec, in a new report published Monday, attributed the attacks to an actor tracked as Gamaredon (aka Shuckworm or Armageddon), a cyber-espionage collective known to be active since at least 2013.</p> <p>In November 2021, Ukrainian intelligence agencies branded the group as a "special project" of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), in addition to pointing fingers at it for carrying out over 5,000 cyberattacks against public authorities and critical infrastructure located in the country.</p> <p>Gamaredon attacks typically originate with phishing emails that trick the recipients into installing a custom remote access trojan called Pterodo. Symantec disclosed that, between July 14, 2021 and August 18, 2021, the actor installed several variants of the backdoor as well as deployed additional scripts and tools.</p> <p>"The attack chain began with a malicious document, likely sent via a phishing email, which was opened by the user of the infected machine," the researchers said. The identity of the affected organization was not disclosed.</p> <p>Towards the end of July, the adversary leveraged the implant to download and run an executable file that acted as a dropper for a VNC client before establishing connections with a remote command-and-control server under their control.</p> <p>"This VNC client appears to be the ultimate payload for this attack," the researchers noted, adding the installation was followed by accessing a number of documents ranging from job descriptions to sensitive company information on the compromised machine.</p> <p>Ukraine Calls Out False Flag Operation in Wiper Attacks</p> <p>The findings come amidst a wave of disruptive and destructive attacks levied against Ukrainian entities by alleged Russian state-sponsored actors, resulting in the deployment of a file wiper dubbed WhisperGate, around the same time multiple websites belonging to the government were defaced.</p> <p>Subsequent investigation into the malware has since revealed that the code used in the wiper was re-purposed from a faux ransomware campaign called WhiteBlackCrypt that was aimed at Russian victims in March 2021.</p> <p>Interestingly, the ransomware is known to include a trident symbol — that is part of Ukraine's coat of arms — in the ransom note it displays to its victims, leading Ukraine to suspect that this may have been a false flag operation deliberately intended to blame a "fake" pro-Ukrainian group for staging an attack on their own government.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Healthcare data breaches rise: 46M records
SOURCE	https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/breach/breaches-exposed-45-67m-patient-records-in-2021-largest-annual-total-since-2015
GIST	<p>Hacking and IT incidents were the leading culprits of healthcare data breaches in 2021, increasing by 10% from the previous year, according to a new Critical Insight report. In total, there were 500 incidents tied to hacking last year, compared with 455 in 2020.</p> <p>The report analyzes breaches of protected health information reported to the Department of Health and Human Services by covered entities and business associates last year. It confirms that PHI was exposed at the highest levels seen since 2015.</p>

In total, 45.67 million patient records were breached last year. The only year to surpass that total in the last 11 years was 2015 and only did so due to one singular breach reported by Anthem, a hacking incident that led to a potential data theft impacting nearly 80 million patients.

The breach tally in 2019 nearly reached 2021's total with 42.37 million records compromised. A recent [Fortified Health](#) Security report confirms these statistics.

While concerning, the Critical Insight report shows that hacking and IT incidents grew at a slower rate than in previous years. For all intents and purposes, the rate of data breaches are relatively flat, with just a 2.4% year-over-year increase.

As noted in several recent reports, 2021 saw some of the most frequent, massive healthcare data breaches since HHS began recording these incidents. In addition, the number of reported breaches and the number of individuals affected slightly declined during the second half of 2021 in comparison with the first half of the year.

Critical Insight researchers explained that it's "too early to tell if that modest improvement represents the beginning of a longer trend in the right direction."

Namely, the total number of reported breaches has been steadily increasing since 2018, with an 84% increase between 2018 and 2021. In fact, "Breaches have actually declined over the past two reporting periods, going from 393 in the second half of 2020 to 368 in the first half of 2021 to 311 in the second half of the year."

"The baseline is so high that the total number of individuals affected in 2021 hit a high of 45 million, up 20% from 34 million in 2020," according to the report. And it's of particular concern, as last year's breach tally is three times as what was reported in 2018, at just 14 million compromised records.

Further, the spike in reported breaches during the second half of 2020 might have been caused by reporting delays due to the pandemic, or undetected dwell time.

The researchers believe there are several possibilities for the decline, such as, hopefully, security teams have indeed improved their defenses in response to the massive surge in attacks in 2020.

Just who is falling victim? The data confirm that healthcare providers reported the most breaches, with 493 attacks in 2021, a slight improvement over the 515 reported in 2020. It's important to note that in several massive third-party breaches, like [the Accellion hack](#), were reported to HHS by the covered entity despite the third-party cause.

The report also shows cyberattacks against health plans rose 35% from 2020 to 2021. Reported business associate attacks also increased between the reported time period, by 18%.

As reported earlier by SC Media, vendor incidents were behind [the biggest breaches in healthcare](#) and more than other entities. The Critical Insights report confirms vendors caused 13% of the incidents, but accounted for 24% of the total affected records.

Lastly, [outpatient and specialty clinics](#) are now seeing more hacking or IT incidents than hospitals, seeing a 41% increase in those particular incident-types last year, in comparison to 2020 stats.

Despite any positive trends, it's certainly not a call to slow these critical cybersecurity improvements. In the coming year, data show that hackers are aiming to exploit bigger targets and leveraging more sophisticated means to accomplish their goals, including targeting known vulnerabilities in the healthcare supply chain.

In particular, Michael Hamilton, Critical Insight CISO explained in the report that ransomware attacks will continue to be a problem across all sectors, despite federal government efforts to disrupt the supply chain.

As such, provider organizations should review the ways hackers are gaining access to health information, which include third-party software vulnerabilities (like in the Accellion incident) and misconfigured databases (as seen with the 20/20 Eye Care network hack).

In light of the continued attacks against supply chain and third-party vendors, healthcare organizations should pay particular attention to these access points and security requirements.

As Amir Magner, [founder and president of CyberMDX](#), previously told SC Media, the ideal scenario would see healthcare entities adopting a zero-trust mindset, requiring each device, user, and resource to be identified before authenticating to the network and granting “minimal access they need to function, based on a trust policy defined especially for them.”

While ideal for most scenarios, zero trust would greatly benefit unmanaged devices where it “usually translates to contextual micro-segmentation, which relies on very strong identification of devices and fine-tuned allow-list policies that enables access to/from their legit ecosystem, excluding all other interactions,” he added.

“More simply, it segments the network so that users only have access to what they need to do their jobs. Why should the accounting department have network access to the devices radiology suite? Or why would the security cameras ever be connected to patient monitoring devices in the nurses’ station,” Magner concluded. “It doesn’t make sense.”

By steadily adopting the zero-trust model, entities can stop attackers from moving laterally across the network to contain breaches.

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HEADLINE	02/01 ‘White Tur’ borrows techniques from APTs
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/white-tur-hacking-group-borrows-techniques-multiple-apt
GIST	<p>A newly detailed threat actor has been observed employing various techniques borrowed from multiple advanced persistent threat (APT) actors, PwC’s cyber threat intelligence team reports.</p> <p>Dubbed White Tur, the adversary hasn’t been attributed to a specific geography, although it appears to have been active since at least 2017.</p> <p>As part of an attack identified in January 2021, the group registered the subdomain mail[.]mod[.]gov[.]rs to phish for the login credentials of Serbian Ministry of Defence employees.</p> <p>The phishing domain had a TLS certificate using the term ‘gov’, which spoofs the word ‘gov’. The .gov spoofing technique was previously employed by APT actors such as Russia-linked Sofacy (also known as APT28).</p> <p>The adversary was also observed abusing the open source project OpenHardwareMonitor for payload execution. For that, it injected code into the legitimate tool, using a technique previously employed by North Korea-based threat actor ZINC.</p> <p>“As part of the attack, PowerShell code retrieves environmental information from the victim using PowerShell WMI objects and utilises the BitsTransfer Module available in PowerShell to download a payload,” PwC says.</p> <p>White Tur’s portfolio also includes macro-enabled documents containing various exploits and governmental, defense, R&D, and telecoms themes; HTA and XSL scripts; PowerShell scripts; and a Jscript backdoor.</p>

	<p>The threat actor was also observed employing a backdoor packaged as a DLL, which allows it to manage files, upload and download files, execute commands, and set malware sleep time. This, PwC says, is “the most functional backdoor” in White Tur’s arsenal.</p> <p>In the backdoor’s PDB path, the researchers also found the name Storm Kitty, which is an open-source malware project designed to capture credentials and log keystrokes.</p> <p>PwC says attributing the activity of White Tur to a specific adversary is difficult because the target region doesn’t have much coverage in threat intelligence blogs: “from our assessment, this particular threat actor has a range of motivations with no clear links to well-known threat actors which are attributed to a government or organisation.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/01 CISA: patch CVEs dating back to 2014
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/cisa-patch-cves-dating-back-to-2014/
GIST	<p>The US government has added eight more vulnerabilities to its growing list of CVEs that must be patched by federal agencies, including some that first appeared eight years ago.</p> <p>The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) first launched its Known Exploited Vulnerabilities Catalog in November 2021 as part of a government effort to enhance cyber-resilience.</p> <p>The Binding Operational Directive (BOD) 22-01 that enabled it applies only to civilian federal agencies, but all organizations are encouraged to monitor the list on an ongoing basis as part of best practice security efforts.</p> <p>The latest eight additions to the catalog include two that must be patched by February 11: a memory corruption vulnerability in Apple’s IOMobileFrameBuffer (CVE-2022-22587) and a stack-based buffer overflow bug SonicWall SMA 100 appliances (CVE-2021-20038).</p> <p>Interestingly, while two of the remaining six CVEs were first discovered and published to the National Vulnerability Database (NVD) in 2020, four come from several years earlier.</p> <p>These include two arbitrary code execution vulnerabilities in the GNU’s Bourne Again Shell (Bash) Unix shell and command language, from 2014 (CVE-2014-7169 and CVE-2014-6271).</p> <p>Also, from 2014 is an Internet Explorer use-after-free bug (CVE-2014-1776).</p> <p>The final CVE on the new list is a privilege escalation vulnerability in Intel’s Active Management Technology (AMT), Small Business Technology (SBT), and Standard Manageability offerings. It was first published back in 2017.</p> <p>Aside from the Apple and SonicWall flaws, all those on the list must be patched by July 28 2022.</p> <p>Their inclusion in the catalog is proof again that threat actors often favor older CVEs that have been forgotten about rather than spending the time and resource researching zero-days.</p> <p>Yaniv Bar-Dayana, CEO and co-founder at Vulcan Cyber, argued that IT teams find it increasingly difficult to stay on top of a mounting patch-load, never mind fixing bugs from several years ago.</p> <p>“We have a couple of options. Either we hire more people to remediate vulnerabilities and mitigate risk. Or we can be more efficient with the people, resources and tools we already have,” he added.</p> <p>“The only way the cybersecurity industry will be able to reduce an increasingly concerning accumulation of risk and associated cyber-debt will be through a risk-based approach to vulnerability prioritization and a</p>

	well-orchestrated approach to risk mitigation. It isn't easy, but it is possible if leaders make cyber-hygiene and risk management a priority."
	CISA now has over 350 vulnerabilities in its "must-patch" catalog.
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HEADLINE	01/31 Exposed: sensitive airport, employees data
SOURCE	https://www.hackread.com/security-giant-expose-3tb-airport-employees-data/
GIST	<p>A Sweden-based multinational security and investigation service provider has been found exposing sensitive data of employees at several different airports across Latin America.</p> <p>The company in discussion is Securitas AB, which according to researchers at SafetyDetectives exposed a whopping 3 terabytes of data containing over 1.5 million files, thanks to one of its misconfigured Amazon S3 buckets.</p> <p>What's worse is that the database was left exposed to public access without any password or security authentication meaning anyone with knowledge of how to find misconfigured databases could have accessed the data.</p> <p>However, due to the humongous size of the database, it was physically impossible to scan all of it. Nevertheless, their analysis revealed that the exposed data included sensitive company records and personal information of airport employees in Colombia, Peru, and probably other countries "or even the rest of the world," researchers emphasized.</p> <p>Airports impacted</p> <p>The list of impacted airports revealed by SafetyDetectives includes Aeropuerto Internacional Jorge Chávez (Lima, PE), El Dorado International Airport (Bogota D.C, COL), Alfonso Bonilla Aragón International Airport (Valle del Cauca, COL) and José María Córdova International Airport (Antioquia, COL).</p> <p>What data was leaked?</p> <p>Due to the humongous size of the database, it was physically impossible to scan all of it. However, their analysis revealed that the exposed data included sensitive company records and personal information of airport employees in Colombia, Peru, and probably other countries "or even the rest of the world," researchers emphasized.</p> <p>According to a blog post published by SafetyDetectives, they identified two datasets that contained records on airport and Securitas employees. These included photos of ID cards and unmarked photos. The ID card photo displayed PII information of employees such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full names • Occupations • National ID Number • Employee photos on the ID card. <p>The second set of unmarked photos contained the most sensitive data belonging to airports, employees, and associated companies such as the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Photos of planes • Photos of employees • Photos of employees loading and unloading luggage. <p>Although SafetyDetectives identified the exposed AWS bucket on October 28th, 2021, the details of it were only shared this week. The good news is that Securitas secured the database on November 2nd, 2021.</p> <p>Consequences</p>

	<p>It is yet unclear whether the database was accessed by a third party with malicious intent such as ransomware gangs or terrorists. But in case it did, it would be devastating for the company, employees, and impacted airports.</p> <p>It may also lead to a massive security mishap based on the fact that the exposed data had photos of planes which is something that is not available in the public domain.</p> <p>Additionally, threat actors can use the exposed data for identity theft to make fake IDs based on legitimate employee information and access sensitive areas at an airport. Hence, possibilities are endless.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 FBI: Beijing Olympics hack, privacy risks
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/fbi-warns-of-2022-beijing-olympics-cyberattack-privacy-risks/
GIST	<p>The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) warned today that threat actors could potentially target the February 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and March 2022 Paralympics. However, evidence of such attacks being planned is yet to be uncovered.</p> <p>"The FBI to date is not aware of any specific cyber threat against the Olympics, but encourages partners to remain vigilant and maintain best practices in their network and digital environments," the US security service said in a private industry notification (PIN) issued on Tuesday.</p> <p>As the FBI explained in the TLP:WHITE PIN, attacks coordinated by financially motivated or nation-state threat actors targeting the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics could involve malware delivery, distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks, ransomware, social engineering, phishing campaigns, and even insider threats.</p> <p>If successful, such attacks could disrupt or block live broadcasts of the event, exfiltrate sensitive information after breaching IT systems, or impact private or public digital infrastructure supporting the Olympics.</p> <p>The attackers' end goal would likely be to "make money, sow confusion, increase their notoriety, discredit adversaries, and advance ideological goals."</p> <p>This warning follows a similar one issued last year regarding potential cyberattack risks surrounding the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics, which were the first to be transmitted exclusively via digital platforms and TV broadcasts due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.</p> <p>Data belonging to the Tokyo 2020 Organizing Committee was stolen in late May 2021, before the competition started, after Japanese information technology company Fujitsu disclosed a breach impacted data belonging to government clients, including the Tokyo 2020 Organizing Committee and the Japanese Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism.</p> <p>In 2020, the Department of Justice also charged six Russian Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) intelligence operatives (believed to be part of the Russian-sponsored hacking group tracked as Sandworm) for hacking operations targeting the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics.</p> <p>Privacy concerns surrounding this year's Winter Olympics As revealed by a Citizen Lab report, My 2022 (the official app for the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics) was found to be insecure as it doesn't protect the users' sensitive data, and a flaw in its encryption system allows middle-men to access documents, audio, and files in cleartext form.</p> <p>The researchers also found that the app collects large amounts of sensitive information, including real-time location, list of installed apps, audio info, location access, device identifiers, WLAN status, complete</p>

	<p>passport info, daily health status, COVID-19 vaccination status, demographic data, and the organization the user works for.</p> <p>The data collection is disclosed in the app's privacy policy and, according to Chinese officials, it is required for COVID-19 protection controls, translation services, and tourism recommendations and navigation.</p> <p>To make things even worse, using the My 2022 app isn't optional since all athletes, members of the press, and the audience are required to install the app and add their personal information to it.</p> <p>FBI also addresses these privacy risks in today's PIN, advising athletes to install the My 2022 application on temporary devices.</p> <p>"The FBI urges all athletes to keep their personal cell phones at home and use a temporary phone while at the Games," the federal agency added.</p> <p>"The National Olympic Committees in some Western countries are also advising their athletes to leave personal devices at home or use temporary phones due to cybersecurity concerns at the Games."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/01 MuddyWater hacking group targets Turkey
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/muddywater-hacking-group-targets-turkey-in-new-campaign/
GIST	<p>The Iranian-backed MuddyWater hacking group is conducting a new malicious campaign targeting private Turkish organizations and governmental institutions.</p> <p>This cyber-espionage group (aka Mercury, SeedWorm, and TEMP.Zagros) was linked this month to Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) by the US Cyber Command (USCYBERCOM).</p> <p>The hacking group has been attributed to attacks against entities in Central and Southwest Asia and numerous public and privately-held organizations from Europe, Asia, and North America in the telecommunications, government (IT services), oil, and airline industry sectors.</p> <p>When conducting attacks, the threat actors use various file types like PDFs, XLS files, and Windows executables to deploy obfuscated PowerShell-based downloaders and gain initial access to targeted networks.</p> <p>Two infection chains</p> <p>A new report by researchers at Cisco Talos links MuddyWater to recent attacks targeting Turkish private organizations and governmental agencies.</p> <p>The attacks start with spear-phishing that uses files with Turkish language names and pretend to come from the country's Health or Interior ministry.</p> <p>As part of the attack, the MuddyWater threat actors use two infection chains that begin with delivering a PDF file. In the first case, the PDF features an embedded button that fetches an XLS file upon clicking it.</p> <p>These files are typical XLS documents that carry malicious VBA macros which initiate the infection process and establish persistence by creating a new Registry key.</p> <p>On the same stage, a VBScript is fetched with a PowerShell downloader and executed through a "living off the land" DLL to evade detection, retrieving the primary payload from the C2.</p> <p>The second infection chain uses an EXE file instead of an XLS, but it still employs the PowerShell downloader, the intermediate VBScript, and adds a new registry entry for persistence.</p>

Using canary tokens

One notable difference in this campaign compared to older ones is the use of canary tokens to track code executions and any subsequent infections on neighboring systems.

The token hides inside the malicious attachment or the email itself and alerts the threat actors when the victim opens the lure and executes the macro.

"The malicious VBA macros consisted of the same set of functionalities for creating the malicious VBS and PS1 scripts, and achieving persistence across reboots," explains the [Cisco Talos report](#).

"However, there was one interesting addition to the macro functionality now. The latest versions of the VBA code deployed could make HTTP requests to a canary token from canarytokens.com."

These tokens can also be used as anti-analysis tools, providing timestamps to the actors and making it easy to identify research/analysis-induced inconsistencies.

Finally, if the token sends requests but the payload isn't fetched, it's an indication that the payload server is blocked, giving the actors valuable information on the situation and driving them to seek alternative delivery methods.

Attribution

The researchers attribute these attacks to the MuddyWater group based on the observed technical indicators, tactics, procedures, and C2 infrastructure.

Notably, the Turkish authorities identified some of the C2 IP addresses used in this campaign from previous attacks and are listed in [official threat advisories](#).

Cisco has additional strong evidence that points to Iranian actors in the form of code and metadata similarities and other indicators that they didn't publish due to intelligence sharing sensitivities.

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HEADLINE	01/31 Report: extorting ransom victims
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/attacks-breaches/mandiant-one-in-7-ransomware-extortion-attacks-expose-ot-data
GIST	<p>Ransomware gangs often up their game by extorting their victims on so-called shaming sites, where they dump the stolen information to pressure the victims to pony up and pay ransom. According to a new analysis of these attacks by incident response provider Mandiant, one in seven of those extortion incidents exposes sensitive operational technology (OT) information stolen from industrial victims in the attacks.</p> <p>Mandiant says more than 1,300 OT organizations in critical infrastructure and industrial production were hit by these so-called "multifaceted extortion" attacks in 2021. In a sampling of those victim cases, Mandiant said stolen OT data included detailed network and process documentation from two oil and gas organizations; admin credentials for an OEM to a manufacturer of trains, as well as backups for Siemens TIA Portal PLC project files; and product diagrams and source code for a platform that tracks automobile fleets via GPS for a satellite vehicle-tracking service provider, among other sensitive documents.</p> <p>"Access to this type of data can enable threat actors to learn about an industrial environment, identify paths of least resistance, and engineer cyber physical attacks. On top of this, other data also included in the leaks about employees, processes, projects, etc. can provide an actor with a very accurate picture of the target's culture, plans, and operations," Mandiant said in its report.</p>
Return to Top	The Mandiant report is available online.

HEADLINE	01/31 BlackCat ransomware on the rise
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SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/threat-intelligence/aggressive-blackcat-ransomware-on-the-rise
GIST	<p>BlackCat, the latest ransomware threat touted on underground forums, has quickly made inroads into the ransomware-as-a-service cybercriminal marketplace by offering 80% to 90% of ransoms to "affiliates" and aggressively outing victims on a name-and-shame blog.</p> <p>In less than a month, the BlackCat group has purportedly compromised more than a dozen victims, named those victims on its blog, and broken into the top 10 threats as measured by victim count, according to recent analysis of the malware by researchers at Palo Alto Networks. The ransomware program seems well-designed and is written in Rust, an efficient programming language that has gained popularity over the past decade.</p> <p>Currently, five victims are in the United States, two in Germany, and one each in France, Netherlands, the Philippines, and Spain, with the final victim's location unknown.</p> <p>The ransomware platform makes extensive use of configuration files to allow the operator to customize the attack to certain victims, determine what processes to shut down, and even use a customized list of credentials to move laterally within a company, says Doel Santos, a threat intelligence analyst with Palo Alto Networks' Unit 42 team.</p> <p>"BlackCat ransomware includes numerous features that could be leveraged by the operator when executing the ransomware," he says. "All of these configurations can be customized by the threat actor to their liking making it highly customizable."</p> <p>This is the latest example of how ransomware groups are adapting to companies' better defenses and law enforcement agencies' collaborative efforts to investigate and prosecute ransomware gangs. In September 2021, researchers from Trend Micro noted that ransomware groups had moved from so-called "double extortion" to adopt multiple extortion methods, including encrypting data, stealing data, using distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, and naming-and-shaming victims.</p> <p>BlackCat—also known as ALPHV—adopts all of these techniques, researchers from Palo Alto Networks said in its analysis.</p> <p>"In some cases, BlackCat operators use the chat to threaten the victim, claiming they will perform a DDoS attack on the victims' infrastructure if the ransom is not paid," the analysis stated. "When it appears in addition to the use of a leak site, this practice is known as triple extortion, a tactic that was observed being used by groups like Avaddon and Suncrypt in the past."</p> <p>Coded in Rust</p> <p>The software is written by one or more Russian developers using the Rust programming language, likely the first time a ransomware group has adopted the up-and-coming coding language. The efficiency of Rust's compiled code allows the malware to extensively use encryption and encode a large number of features while requiring little overhead, the analysis stated.</p> <p>While BlackCat is the first ransomware encountered by Palo Alto Networks that uses Rust, other malware — such as the first-stage downloader, RustyBuer — was also developed last year using the programming language, the company said.</p> <p>"Rust has been around for some time, [and is] not as popular as other programming languages, but it's gaining notoriety because it is fast and memory-efficient — two things that may be of interest to ransomware operators," Santos says.</p> <p>The use of Rust allows the malware to run on both Windows and Linux systems and allows the developers to create individualized campaigns, Palo Alto Networks stated in its analysis.</p>

Among other techniques, BlackCat also uses an access token to limit who can see the ongoing negotiation with the victim. Only participants with the access token can log on to the chat and hub for paying ransoms, an attempt to avoid third-party snooping, Santos says.

"Traditional ransomware samples are usually preconfigured and include links that get leaked and allows external entities access to negotiations and additional details that are meant to be seen only by the victim," he says.

Early Payment Discounts

The BlackCat group has requested ransom payments of as much as \$14 million, with discounts for victims that pay before the deadline.

While BlackCat has taken off since November, the two largest ransomware groups, as measured by the number of monthly victims, continue to be Lockbit 2.0 and Conti.

The 2-year-old Conti ransomware continues to be successful, with the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) [warning in September](#) of an increase in attacks using Conti. Security researchers [warned in August](#) that a rewritten version of the Lockbit ransomware program, dubbed Lockbit 2.0, had been released. The Lockbit group focused on an aggressive recruitment drive to gain affiliates to spread their malware, a strategy that BlackCat has obviously copied. The Lockbit group's leak site listed 50 victims in December 2021, while Conti has compromised 37 victims, according to Palo Alto Networks.

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HEADLINE	01/31 Ransomware: 58% target 3 industries
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/ransomware-over-half-of-attacks-are-targeting-these-three-industries/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>Over half of ransomware attacks are targeting one of three industries; banking, utilities and retail, according to analysis by cybersecurity researchers – but they've also warned that all industries are at risk from attacks.</p> <p>The data has been gathered by Trellix – formerly McAfee Enterprise and FireEye – from detected attacks between July and September 2021, a period when some of the most high-profile ransomware attacks of the past year happened.</p> <p>According to detections by Trellix, banking and finance was the most common target for ransomware during the reporting period, accounting for 22% of detected attacks. That's followed by 20% of attacks targeting the utilities sector and 16% of attacks targeting retailers. Attacks against the three sectors in combination accounted for 58% of all of those detected.</p> <p>Utilities is a particularly enticing industry for ransomware gangs to target because the nature of the industry means it provides vital services to people and businesses, and if those services can't be accessed, it has an impact – as demonstrated by the ransomware attack against Colonial Pipeline, which led to gas shortages in the north eastern United States. The incident saw Colonial paying a ransom of millions to cyber criminals in order to receive the decryption key.</p> <p>Ransomware attacks against retailers can also have a significant impact, forcing shops to be restricted to taking cash payments, or even forcing them to close altogether while the issue is resolved, preventing people from buying everyday items they need.</p> <p>Other sectors that were significant targets for ransomware include education, government and industrial services, serving as a warning that no matter which sector they operate in, all organisations could be a potential target for ransomware.</p>

	<p>"Despite the financial, utilities and retail sectors accounting for nearly 60% of all ransomware detections, no business or industry is safe from attack, and these findings should act as a reminder of this," said Fabien Rech, VP EMEA for Trellix.</p> <p>"As cyber criminals adapt their methods to target the most sensitive data and services, organisations must shore up their defences to mitigate further threats."</p> <p>While several high-profile ransomware groups of 2021 seem to have disappeared or gone dark, particularly following arrests, new gangs and malware strains are emerging all the time and ransomware remains a key cybersecurity threat to organisations around the world.</p> <p>In order to help protect networks against ransomware and other cyberattacks, it's recommended that organisations regularly apply the required security updates to operating systems, applications and software, which can prevent hackers from exploiting known vulnerabilities to launch attacks.</p> <p>It's also recommended that organisations apply multi-factor authentication across all accounts and that security teams attempt to scan for credential-stealing attacks and other potential suspicious activity in order to prevent attacks before they happen.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 FTC warns social media users on scams
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/ftc-warns-social-media-users-about-targeted-advertising-as-scams-abound-11643669222?mod=hp_minor_pos1
GIST	<p>Scams that originate on social media, from fake Instagram Shops to false online romances that lead to extortion, ballooned between 2020 and 2021, according to a new report from the Federal Trade Commission. Targeted advertising looks like it has something to do with it, the agency said.</p> <p>Bad actors can “use the tools available to advertisers on social media platforms to systematically target people with bogus ads based on personal details such as their age, interests, or past purchases,” the FTC said in its report.</p> <p>Consumers should protect themselves by limiting who can see their posts and information, as well as checking to see whether they can opt out of targeted advertising, the FTC said.</p> <p>The suggestion that social media users eschew targeted advertising perplexes some who work in the advertising industry and at antifraud organizations.</p> <p>“Turning off personalized ads settings in social platforms is a terrible idea,” said Wayne Blodwell, founder and chief executive of TPA Digital Ltd., a digital advertising consulting firm. “Users have a far more enjoyable experience with social platforms when the ads, which fund the platforms, are relevant to them, and scammers can easily scam without using targeted ads.”</p> <p>Many platforms’ most-stringent privacy settings still allow advertisers to target users based on some basic data, and bad actors can and do target users indiscriminately, without the need for any personal “hook,” said Mason Wilder, research manager at the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners.</p> <p>“I can say with quite a bit of confidence that opting out of targeted advertising, to the extent that you’re even able to on these platforms, is not going to protect you from scam ads,” Mr. Wilder said. “The best thing you can do is make yourself aware of the different types of scams and red flags of scams, and have a healthy skepticism of everything that you see on any social media platform, especially if it’s an advertisement.”</p> <p>Reports of losses to fraudulent schemes initiated on social media more than doubled, to 95,000 in 2021 from 46,000 in 2020, the FTC said in its report</p>

Consumer complaints amounted to total losses of around \$770 million, up from \$258 million in 2020. The published data suggest that social media was a more profitable medium for scammers in 2021 than other means of duping people into parting with money such as email and phone schemes, which in 2021 made scammers at least \$554 million and \$546 million, respectively, the FTC said.

Although romance and investment scams claimed the largest amount of money, the highest number of scam reports to the FTC came from those who said they were defrauded trying to buy something they saw advertised on social media. In nearly 70% of those reports, people said they placed an order, usually after seeing an ad, but never received the product, the FTC said.

Some complained of ads that impersonated real online retailers and drove people to fake websites that looked like the real thing. Nearly nine out of 10 consumers who named a platform where they were targeted with shopper scams identified Meta Platforms Inc.'s Facebook and Instagram, the commission's report said.

Meta puts significant resources toward tackling fraud and abuse, a company spokeswoman said.

"We take legal action against those responsible when we can and always encourage people to report this behavior when they see it," she said.

Meta has gotten better at understanding the common traits of fraudulent ads, and as a result is improving its automated detection systems and the processes of its human reviewers, the spokeswoman added.

The IAB Tech Lab, a nonprofit that develops technology and standards for the online advertising industry, said it has built tools that let bona fide advertisers authenticate themselves in the plumbing of digital advertising, therefore making it easier for platforms to weed out fraudulent companies.

"Adopting these solutions and addressing this problem does not only go [some] ways in protecting the consumer, but it also protects the advertiser from bad actors using their brand to scam customers and defame their brand image," said Shailley Singh, senior vice president of product management and global programs at the organization, in an email.

Along with limiting who can see social media activity and opting out of targeted advertising, the FTC recommended slowing down online romances that feel rushed, checking out retailers on a different platform before buying, calling friends who appear to be asking for cash and refusing to send money to strangers.

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HEADLINE	02/01 Grindr disappears from app stores China
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/01/grindr-disappears-from-app-stores-in-china-amid-olympics-crackdown
GIST	<p>Gay dating app Grindr has disappeared from multiple app stores in China as authorities tighten control of the country's already heavily policed internet and purge online behaviour the ruling Communist party dislikes.</p> <p>The country's cyber authority is conducting a month-long campaign to root out illegal and sensitive content during the lunar new year holiday and February's Winter Olympics.</p> <p>Although the world's most populous nation decriminalised homosexuality in 1997, same-sex marriage is illegal and LGBTQ issues remain taboo. The LGBTQ community is under pressure, with web content censored and depictions of gay romance in films banned.</p> <p>Apple says Grindr's developers removed the app from Apple's China App store. Data from mobile research firm Qimai shows it was no longer available on Thursday.</p>

	<p>Searches for the matchmaking app on Android and similar platforms operated by Chinese companies also returned no results. Google's Play Store is not available in China.</p> <p>Grindr did not respond to an AFP request for comment. Local Grindr competitors such as Blued remain available for download.</p> <p>The Chinese former owner of Grindr, Beijing Kunlun Tech, sold the app to investors in 2020 under pressure from US authorities concerned that the potential misuse of its data could present national security risks.</p> <p>On Tuesday, the cyberspace administration announced a drive to crack down on rumours, pornography and other web content.</p> <p>The campaign aims to "create a civilised, healthy, festive and auspicious online atmosphere for public opinion during the lunar new year", the administration said in a statement.</p> <p>Last year, social media accounts belonging to major university LGBTQ rights groups were blocked from WeChat, China's dominant messaging and social media app.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 WA reopens website: order free Covid tests
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/wa-reopens-website-to-order-free-covid-tests-a-week-after-running-out-of-stock/
GIST	<p>Washington state on Monday reopened its website that allows residents to order coronavirus rapid tests, after running out of supplies and closing the site less than a day after its initial launch.</p> <p>The state Department of Health has received hundreds of thousands more at-home tests, and anticipates delivering tests to another 120,000 homes with the new batch, according to a DOH statement.</p> <p>The state first introduced the website, sayyescovidhometest.org, on Jan. 21, allowing Washingtonians to get up to five free tests shipped to their homes — but within eight hours, all 1.4 million available tests had been snatched up. About 340,000 homes received tests then, according to DOH.</p> <p>The state at the time blamed the quick depletion of tests on national supply chain shortages, which have created challenges in securing kits from local pharmacies and finding appointments at testing sites.</p> <p>"We are thrilled to be able to open the portal for the second time this month to increase access to these tests statewide," state Secretary of Health Dr. Umair A. Shah said in the Monday statement.</p> <p>Because testing demand remains high in Washington, state officials warned again Monday that the website could close a second time if supplies run out, but that it will reopen once more tests arrive in the state.</p> <p>The website is funded by the state and in partnership with health care technology company CareEvolution and Amazon, the state said. The tests are approved under the Food and Drug Administration's emergency-use authorization for those ages 2 and up. They should arrive at homes within a "few days" of the order being placed, according to DOH.</p> <p>The tests are secured by CareEvolution, then shipped to Amazon, which processes them and ships them directly to homes, DOH spokesperson Frank Ameduri said in an email.</p> <p>The tests instruct users to take a "quick swab" inside each nostril, then wait a few minutes for rapid results. Further instructions about how to test and see results should be included in each kit.</p> <p>If you test positive, the state encourages you to report your infection to its COVID-19 hotline, 1-800-525-0127 (then press #).</p>

	Washingtonians can also get coronavirus test kits through the federal government at covidtests.gov , at local pharmacies or at a local testing site.
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HEADLINE	01/31 Metaverse serious problem for kids?
SOURCE	https://www.cnbc.com/2022/01/31/psychologists-metaverse-could-be-a-problem-for-kids-mental-health.html
GIST	<p>If there's one thing that tech companies, retailers, content creators and investors can agree on, it's this: There's plenty of money to be made from the metaverse.</p> <p>But as CEOs try to elbow past their rivals to gain a foothold in the still nascent digital space, some psychologists and mental health experts say the race to turn a profit is taking attention away from a crucial question: Will the metaverse be a safe place, especially for kids and teens?</p> <p>The answer isn't encouraging. Recent research has shown myriad negative effects of social media on the psyches of children and adolescents, from the prevalence of bullying and harassment to self-esteem and body image issues. Those same pitfalls could be just as prevalent — if not worse — in the wide-open metaverse, with its series of vast virtual worlds intended for both work and play.</p> <p>But if tech companies take those concerns seriously from the beginning, and build solutions into their metaverse products, they could actually benefit children's mental health, some experts say.</p> <p>"All of these new tools, and all of these new possibilities, could be used for good or for evil," Mitch Prinstein, a clinical psychologist who serves as chief science officer for the American Psychological Association, tells CNBC Make It.</p> <p>Potentially worse than social media</p> <p>Today's social media platforms are already dangerous for some kids and teens. Virtual reality's level of immersion could make those problems even worse, says Albert "Skip" Rizzo, a psychologist who serves as the director for medical virtual reality at USC's Institute for Creative Technologies.</p> <p>"There's a potency about being immersed in a world that is different than observing and interacting...through a flat screen monitor," Rizzo says. "Once you're actually embodied in a space, even though you can't be physically touched, we can be exposed to things that take on a level of realism that could be psychologically assaulting."</p> <p>The use of 3D digital avatars in the metaverse carries another problem, too: Being able to modify your likeness to project a version of yourself that differs from real life can be "pretty dangerous for adolescents, in particular," Prinstein says.</p> <p>"You are what other people think about you in adolescence," he says. "And the idea of being able to fictionalize your identity and receive very different feedback can really mess with a teenager's identity."</p> <p>Prinstein worries that tech companies are targeting their social media and metaverse platforms at this highly suggestible demographic — during an important stretch of their brains' mental and emotional development — with potentially dire consequences.</p> <p>"This is just an exacerbation of the problems that we've already started to see with the effects of social media," he says. "This is creating more loneliness. This is creating far more body image concerns [and] exposure to dangerous content that's related to suicidality."</p> <p>Some problems are already here</p> <p>In December, Meta launched a virtual reality social platform, Horizon Worlds. Last March, Microsoft launched a cloud collaboration service for virtual 3D business meetings. Other companies, like Roblox and Epic Games, are grabbing toeholds in the metaverse through popular online games.</p>

One such game publisher, VRChat, already shows evidence of dangers for young users. In December, research from the nonprofit Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) [found that](#) minors were regularly exposed to graphic sexual content, racist and violent language, bullying and other forms of harassment on VRChat's platform, which is typically accessed through Meta's Oculus headsets.

Meta and Oculus have [policies prohibiting](#) these sorts of negative behaviors on their VR platforms. When reached for comment, a Meta spokesperson referred CNBC Make It to [the company's previous statements](#) on trying to build a metaverse "responsibly," and the [Oculus platform's tools](#) for reporting abuse and blocking other users. VRChat did not immediately respond to CNBC Make It's request for comment.

That's part of the problem, says CCDH CEO Imran Ahmed: Safety policies, however well-intentioned, can be difficult to monitor and enforce in virtual spaces.

"Virtual reality really does need a lot of safety built in from the start, because you can't search [the metaverse] for hate or sexual abuse," he says. "You can't. It happens in an instant [and] there's nothing you can do."

Ahmed's prediction: Parents will need to be wary about their kids' access to the metaverse. "I think parents will be asking themselves: Do I feel safe knowing that Mark Zuckerberg is the guy in charge of deciding who influences my children, who might be able to bully them, and whether or not they're safe in cyberspace?" he says.

'They're incentivized to make a profit'

The irony is that virtual reality and the metaverse have massive promise for improving users' mental health. Rizzo's [research at USC](#), for example, shows potential for virtual reality treatments to promote empathy in patients and help with issues like psychological trauma and PTSD.

But Rizzo and Prinstein agree the onus is on tech companies to prioritize the safety of their users over their own incentive to turn a profit.

Ahmed says tech companies could employ tools to ensure the metaverse's safety for young users, including strict age verification tools to prevent predators from posing as younger users, plentiful content moderators and "rapid response" when users report violations of inappropriate behavior.

"There's no reason why there couldn't be the presence of moderators in spaces in which children are present [or] virtual chaperones," he says. "But, of course, that would require money."

It's also likely too much to ask parents, most of whom have "relatively little personal experience with understanding these platforms" to monitor what their children are exposed to in the metaverse, Prinstein adds.

His solution: Find ways "to incentivize these companies to use these brilliant tools to actually improve society..." he says. "Right now, they're incentivized to make a profit."

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HEADLINE	01/31 El Salvador rejects IMF call to drop bitcoin
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/el-salvador-angrily-rejects-imf-call-drop-bitcoin-82588223
GIST	<p>SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador -- The government of El Salvador on Monday rejected a recommendation by the International Monetary Fund to drop Bitcoin as legal tender in the Central American country.</p> <p>Treasury Minister Alejandro Zelaya angrily said that "no international organization is going to make us do anything, anything at all."</p> <p>Zelaya told a local television station that Bitcoin is an issue of "sovereignty."</p>

	<p>“Countries are sovereign nations and they take sovereign decisions about public policy,” he said.</p> <p>The IMF recommended last week that El Salvador dissolve the \$150 million trust fund it created when it made the cryptocurrency legal tender and return any of those unused funds to its treasury.</p> <p>The agency cited concerns about the volatility of Bitcoin prices, and the possibility of criminals using the cryptocurrency. After nearly doubling in value late last year, Bitcoin has plunged in value.</p> <p>Zelaya said El Salvador has complied with all financial transaction and money laundering rules.</p> <p>The trust fund was intended to allow the automatic conversion of Bitcoin to U.S. dollars — El Salvador’s other currency — to encourage people wary of adopting the highly volatile digital currency.</p> <p>The IMF also recommended eliminating the offer of \$30 as an incentive for people to start using the digital wallet “Chivo” and increasing regulation of the digital wallet to protect consumers. It suggested there could be benefits to the use of Chivo, but only using dollars, not Bitcoin.</p> <p>“In the near-term the actual costs of implementing Chivo and operationalizing the Bitcoin law exceed potential benefits,” the report said.</p> <p>Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele had been dismissive of the IMF’s recommendation’s concerning Bitcoin.</p> <p>Government officials told the IMF that the launch of “Chivo” had significantly increased financial inclusion, drawing millions of people who previously lacked bank accounts into the financial system. They also spoke of the parallel tourism promotion targeting Bitcoin enthusiasts.</p> <p>The government did not see a need to scale back the scope of its Bitcoin law, but agreed regulation could be strengthened, according to a report.</p> <p>Bukele led the push to adopt Bitcoin as legal tender alongside the U.S. dollar. El Salvador’s Legislative Assembly made the country the first to do so in June and the Bitcoin law went into effect in September.</p> <p>El Salvador and the IMF have been negotiating \$1.3 billion in lending for months.</p>
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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	02/01 Qatar, Taliban agree: evacuations to resume
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/qatar-reaches-deal-with-taliban-resume-evacuations-axios-2022-02-01/
GIST	<p>Feb 1 (Reuters) - Qatar has reached an agreement with the Taliban to resume chartered evacuations out of Kabul airport, the Axios news website reported on Tuesday citing an interview with Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani.</p> <p>The agreement was for two flights per week, chartered by Qatar Airways, and would allow the United States and other countries to evacuate thousands more of their citizens and at-risk Afghans, Axios said.</p> <p>The minister spoke to Axios on Monday in Washington, during an official visit with Qatar Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani.</p> <p>A senior Qatar government source told Reuters on Jan. 27 that Qatar Airways has resumed operating passenger evacuation flights from Afghanistan, after a two-month halt. read more</p>

	<p>Qatar stopped operating evacuation flights in early December amid a dispute with the Taliban over which passengers were permitted to take the flights.</p> <p>Talks were under way to allow one flight per week operated by Ariana Afghan Airlines, Axios cited the Qatari minister as saying in the interview.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 ISIS leader killed in Iraq airstrike
SOURCE	https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/310120223
GIST	<p>ERBIL, Kurdistan Region - The Iraqi National Security Services on Monday confirmed the killing of an Islamic State (ISIS) leader north of Baghdad following a DNA test.</p> <p>The National Security Services confirmed the death of the so-called deputy governor, or Wali, of northern Baghdad in an airstrike in al-Tarmia district, north of the Iraqi capital.</p> <p>The statement added that he was identified as Adwan Farhan Jafal, following DNA testing.</p> <p>ISIS controlled swathes of Iraqi and Syrian land in 2014 but was declared territorially defeated in 2017 and 2019 respectively. However, the group still poses a threat to both countries through bombings, hit-and-run attacks, kidnappings, and other tactics.</p> <p>The announcement comes a day after Iraqi counter-terrorism forces announced that they had launched a major campaign to inspect prisons on the orders of the Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi. The measures to secure Iraqi prisons from potential security gaps followed a major prison siege by the terror group in Hasaka, northeast Syria (Rojava).</p> <p>ISIS detainees led an audacious attack on the al-Sina'a prison in Hasaka's Ghweran neighborhood on January 21. The facility housed around 5,000 ISIS members at the time of the incursion, and the major escape attempt raised significant concern about the terror group's capabilities, despite their complete lack of territorial control.</p> <p>An additional 5,000 other militants are held by the SDF in other jails.</p> <p>The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) on Monday said that the death toll was 121 of its fighters, prison guards and civilians, as well as 374 ISIS members since the clashes started.</p> <p>According to a report published this month by Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, there is little evidence of a significant ISIS resurgence in Iraq, with the militants increasingly isolated from the population.</p> <p>“The Islamic State’s insurgency in Iraq underwent a steep decline over the last 20 months,” the global security think-tank states. “A comprehensive analysis of attack metrics shows an insurgency that has deteriorated in both the quality of its operations and overall volume of attack activity, which has fallen to its lowest point since 2003.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 From ‘standout’ student to ISIS leader?
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/m7v9dn/kansas-mom-went-from-stand-out-student-to-alleged-isis-leader
GIST	<p>A Kansas mom, once described as a “standout student” by a former teacher, appeared in a U.S. court Monday to face charges for allegedly leading an all-female ISIS brigade.</p> <p>Allison Fluke-Ekren, 42, a former school teacher and the mother of several children, was flown to Alexandria, Virginia, over the weekend after being arrested in Syria by the FBI, where she is facing terrorism charges for her role as the leader of an all-female ISIS brigade. If convicted of providing and</p>

conspiring to provide material support or resources to ISIS, Fluke-Ekren could serve 20 years in federal prison.

In court, Fluke-Ekren sounded somber and said she understood the gravity of the charges against her as the judge read them aloud. After the court granted Fluke-Ekren access to a public defender, U.S. prosecutors asked the courts to bar the alleged ISIS operative from contacting her family living in the U.S. while she is in custody.

“I know this is an atypical request,” said a U.S. prosecutor, “but they do not wish [her] to have contact with her family. That includes her father, her mother, stepmother... her adult children who are here in the United States.”

The judge noted that would be difficult to enforce legally but said, in light of the request from the family, if Fluke-Ekren contacted them against their wishes it could be negatively considered during her bond hearing set for Thursday.

Part of a federal complaint, first filed in 2019 and unsealed Saturday, alleges that Fluke-Ekren, who remarried several times to various ISIS operatives while in Syria, was the senior commander of “Khatiba Nusaybah,” an all-female unit of ISIS that trained women and children on how to use automatic assault rifles, grenades, and suicide belts.

The complaint and associated memorandum also alleged Fluke-Ekren was intent on carrying out “violent jihad” in the U.S. and offered up plots to ISIS leadership targeting shopping malls and an unnamed U.S. campus.

The circumstances of the FBI arrest of Fluke-Ekren remains murky. A spokesperson for the bureau referred all questions on the case to the Department of Justice, noting, “We have no additional comment.”

In its [media release on the case](#), the DOJ said Fluke-Ekren was “previously apprehended in Syria and transferred into the custody of the FBI.”

She was a ‘standout’ American student

There’s still plenty we don’t know about Fluke-Ekren, including where and when she became radicalized. VICE News spoke with her now-retired high school biology teacher Larry Miller, who offered some insight into the Fluke-Ekren he knew. Miller taught her in seventh and eighth grade at Topeka Collegiate, a private school in Kansas, in the 90s. Back then, she went by her maiden name of Allison Brooks.

Through his long career as a high school science teacher in both public and private schools, Miller thinks he’s probably taught thousands of kids over the years. But Fluke-Ekren, he said, “does stand out,” and they kept in touch years later.

“She was special,” he said. “We knew her parents. Her parents came to our place; I went to theirs.” What’s more she shared some of his passions. “She loved photography, environmental science, and herpetology, which is the study of turtles and amphibians,” he said. “She helped me set up field trips when she got a bit older... My wife was a librarian and also in educational programs. We got to know her real well. We thought she was a wonderful person.”

A [1994 newsletter](#) from the Kansas Herpetological Society detailed some of the research projects led by Miller and his students, including Fluke-Ekren’s (then Brooks). Miller remembered her as being popular, getting along well with everyone, and never having expressed any radical political or religious views. Sometime in the late 1990s, just a couple years after graduating, Fluke-Ekren got married at a Methodist Church, and hired Miller as the wedding photographer.

It’s not clear why or when her relationship with her first husband, with whom she had two children, fell apart. Based on a news article published [in a local Kansas paper](#), by 2004 she was married to Volkan

Ekren (it's unclear whether this was the same husband she ultimately went to Syria with). She and her kids were the subject of a story about the uptick in popularity of homeschooling.

Miller said that he and Fluke-Ekren got back in touch around 2008, when she emailed him from her work address, which was at a college in Indiana. She talked about how she had a wonderful family life, what she remembered from his science classes, and that she'd ended up pursuing a career in biology. She later graduated from Kansas University, taught science at a private school for a while, then got her masters to teach in Indiana. "So many things I was so proud to read," Miller said. She ended the email, "My biggest hope is that I can pass on to my students the torch of curiosity and excitement that you gave to me."

The following year, she reached out to Miller again—she was interested in moving back to Kansas and wanted to know if he knew of any teaching opportunities. He connected her with the principal of a nearby school district who was looking for a science teacher. Miller wasn't sure what happened next, just that she was offered the job but ultimately she decided to move overseas to Egypt.

As far as Miller knew, Fluke-Ekren loved her life in Egypt. She'd gotten a job as a teacher, and told Miller the students were enthusiastic and really interested in nature. Around that time, a mutual friend introduced her to Marwa Faisal, a biology teacher in Cairo (they connected online and met in person once). Faisal, who didn't know that Fluke-Ekren had been arrested until VICE News contacted her, said she only knew her to be a "lovely mother and teacher."

Between 2008 and 2010, Fluke-Ekren ran a blog "4 Kansas Kids" that chronicled her family's life in Kansas, a brief stint in Egypt, and eventual relocation to Turkey. She worked as a teacher in both countries. The final blog post was made in June 2010.

At some point, Miller fell out of touch with Fluke-Ekren. He'd written "Happy Birthday" on her Facebook wall a few years in a row, but hadn't heard anything back. "No one had heard from her," Miller said.

From America to Egypt to Syria

The indictment alleges Fluke-Ekren remarried several times after her husband was killed while trying to conduct a terror attack for ISIS. One of her husbands—it's not clear which one—was allegedly a prominent ISIS military leader.

It is also unclear exactly when Fluke-Ekren moved to Syria. But according to one of the sources who gave evidence to the FBI, Fluke-Ekren and her family crossed the border from Turkey into Syria in 2014 with the intent of "living in the land of Sharia." In 2014, ISIS came to global prominence when the group captured Mosul from the Iraqi army.

Fluke-Ekren told one witness cited in the indictment that she attempted to send a message to her family to trick them into believing she was dead, so that the U.S. government would not try to find her.

She also claimed to the witness that she never wanted to go back to the United States and wanted to die a martyr in Syria.

According to the indictment, one source told the FBI they lived with Fluke-Ekren for a number of weeks in the Syrian city of Al-Bab, then an ISIS stronghold, in 2014, and alleged Fluke-Ekren and her husband had brought \$15,000 with them and used it to purchase AK-47s, grenades, and other weapons. The source said Fluke-Ekren's husband was a sniper trainer for ISIS at the time.

The indictment doesn't contain any information about the nationality or name of Fluke-Ekren's husband at this time.

The source goes on to allege that Fluke-Ekren outlined a plan to attack a U.S. college by "dressing like infidels" and dropping off a backpack filled with explosives, adding that she was planning to enter the U.S. via Mexico.

The plan, according to Fluke-Ekren, had been approved by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, then-leader of ISIS, who was later [killed by a U.S. operation in 2019](#).

But her plans were put on hold because she discovered she was pregnant in late 2014. This did not stop her from helping the ISIS cause, however, as the source who had lived with Fluke-Ekren told the FBI that Fluke-Ekren worked on translating speeches from the group's leaders so they could be more widely shared online. Fluke-Ekren was fluent in English, Turkish, Arabic, and Spanish, according to another FBI source, who was a member of Fluke-Ekren's family.

She was also allegedly responsible for teaching extremist doctrine, and training women and children in the use of weapons as well as suicide vests, the first witness said.

In 2016, speaking to a member of her own family who was with her in Syria, Fluke-Ekren suggested parking a vehicle packed with explosives in the basement or the parking garage of a shopping mall and triggering the explosion with a cell phone, the indictment says.

The witness added that Fluke-Ekren didn't continue with such a plan because her then-husband had objected.

Fluke-Ekren however continued to fantasize about attacking locations with large crowds of people, according to the witness's statement, believing that any attack that didn't kill a large number of people to be "a waste of resources."

Several sources told the FBI that Fluke-Ekren's house was filled with weapons and that she was rarely seen without a gun. One witness, who met Fluke-Ekren in the Syrian city of Tabqah, claims to have seen one of the Fluke-Ekren's sons, who was five or six at the time, holding a machine gun.

In 2016, Fluke-Ekren appears to have moved to Raqqa, ISIS' self-proclaimed capital, where she took on a new leadership role within the group.

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HEADLINE	02/01 Taliban arrest long-time Uzbek commander
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/01/taliban-uzbek-afghanistan/
GIST	<p>MAIMANA, Afghanistan — By all accounts, Makhdoom Alam was a Taliban stalwart. The 45-year-old ethnic Uzbek commander fought U.S. and Afghan forces for two decades and was held for five years in a U.S.-run prison. Last summer, his fighters seized three northern provinces, helping pave the way for the Taliban to take over the nation. With each victory, his influence grew.</p> <p>Two weeks ago, the Taliban arrested him.</p> <p>That was enough to touch off a minor rebellion in this Uzbek-dominated northern provincial capital. Hundreds of Alam's supporters took to the streets on Jan. 13, their anger fueled by long-simmering ethnic grievances — and accusations that the predominantly Pashtun Taliban didn't want an Uzbek to gain too much power within its ranks.</p> <p>"Be careful, Uzbeks. They will arrest you all, one by one," one protester shouted in a video taken on that day. "If they can arrest a person who fought for them for 20 years, they can arrest you, too."</p> <p>Alam's detention represents one of the first internal challenges to the Taliban regime, opening a window into the obstacles facing the militants as they transition from a guerrilla insurgency to a political force.</p> <p>Like previous Afghan governments, the Taliban is led by Pashtuns, the ethnic majority in a country where minorities have been marginalized or underrepresented for decades.</p> <p>To many Uzbeks, Alam's saga signals a continuation of such policies.</p>

“We have been victims of discrimination for a long time,” said Abdullah, a protester who spoke on the condition that only his first name be used, fearing reprisals. “The Taliban say they are an Islamic government and in Islam there is no discrimination. So why do they want to arrest our leaders and those who represent us?”

In an interview, the Taliban governor of Faryab province rejected the accusations of ethnic discrimination as “baseless.” He insisted that the demonstrations, which were swiftly suppressed by Taliban forces, were orchestrated by officials of the former Afghan government. Alam’s arrest, he added, is an example of the Taliban’s good governance.

“This shows the government is so serious that even their commanders or high-ranking officials who commit any mistake are not above the law,” said Qari Hafizullah Pahlawan Ferdous, the governor.

But even Ferdous doesn’t know why Alam was arrested. Some local media reports suggested that he underrepresented to Taliban officials in Kabul the amount of heavy weaponry he and his roughly 4,000 fighters possessed. But most people, including Alam’s family and military comrades, said he was falsely accused of kidnapping a boy from a wealthy family two years ago. The boy is still missing.

“The reasons for his arrest are still not clear for us as well,” said Ferdous, an ethnic Turkmen. “He was arrested by the officials in Kabul. They know better why he was arrested.”

The Washington Post sent a list of questions to the Taliban seeking clarification on Alam’s arrest and responses to the accusations of discrimination. Bilal Karimi, a deputy spokesman for the Taliban, replied that “investigations are underway in this regard” and “are not yet completed.” He declined to comment further.

The controversy over Alam comes at a delicate time for the Taliban. When the militants returned as Afghanistan’s rulers in August, their leaders vowed to create a government inclusive of all of Afghanistan’s ethnic groups and religions, a move to convince the international community that the new government deserved diplomatic recognition and financial backing. But nearly six months later, that promise has yet to materialize.

The 33-member cabinet remains dominated by ethnic Pashtun hard-liners and Sunni Muslims, who hold the large majority of the powerful positions. Members of the long-oppressed Shiite Hazara minority have been evicted from their homes in some provinces. The community remains deeply suspicious of the Taliban’s intentions, despite outreach efforts by the militants.

The Taliban is trying to win over Afghanistan’s Shiites with a 33-year-old Hazara emissary. But many question the group’s sincerity.

Here in Faryab province, where Uzbeks are a majority, the ethnic fissures have been deepening for months. Even though many mid-level security and political officials are Uzbek, most residents viewed the Taliban’s appointment of an ethnic Turkmen governor and a Pashtun as his deputy as an attempt to dilute their community’s influence. The most powerful Uzbek was Alam, and then he was gone.

“The demonstrations sent a clear message to the central government,” said a professor of politics at Faryab University, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for security reasons. “If they continue discriminatory policies, they will face a popular reaction that will create problems for the Taliban to rule this province and neighboring provinces.”

The professor added: “It could also inspire other ethnic groups to rise up against them and their policies.”

The rise of Makhdoom Alam

Alam once was a Taliban poster boy for diversity. Born in Faryab, he was among the first Uzbeks to join the Taliban in the mid-1990s, when the militants first ruled Afghanistan.

Back then, the Taliban had dispatched Pashtun fighters and officials to rule the province and enforce its ultraconservative decrees. In his teens, Alam was posted to Herat, where he rose to become a commander, according to two relatives.

When the Taliban was ousted in 2001 after the Sept. 11 attacks, Alam returned to Faryab and resumed his religious studies. But within a few years, he joined the emerging Taliban resistance, commanding a group of fighters that staged roadside bombings and guerrilla attacks on U.S. and Afghan government forces.

In 2010, U.S. Special Forces arrested and jailed him at Bagram, the American air base north of Kabul. Five years later, Alam was released by Afghan authorities after a group of tribal elders from Faryab vouched for him, said the relatives.

“He then rejoined the Taliban,” said Khairullah Mobasher, Alam’s cousin and a Taliban commander in charge of the military airport in Maimana.

By then, the Taliban was actively seeking to add more ethnic minorities to its ranks to project itself as a national insurgency. Alam played a key role in recruiting more Uzbeks from Faryab and neighboring provinces as well as Turkmen and Tajiks, although their numbers are still dwarfed by the Pashtuns in the Taliban.

In 2017, the militants anointed Alam the head of their military commission, increasing his influence.

Last year, Alam was instrumental in the Taliban takeover of Faryab and two neighboring provinces, Jowzjan and Sar-e Pol, said the professor and local officials. Tribal and religious mediators persuaded provincial officials of the Ashraf Ghani government to surrender to Alam and the Taliban.

After the takeover of Kabul in August, Alam headed a force of more than 4,000 men and was one of the top Taliban military commanders in the north. Alam, the father of eight children from four wives, also was appointed the deputy governor of Sar-e Pol province, said his relatives. His promotion makes his arrest all the more confounding to his family, friends and supporters.

“The Taliban treated him well; they trusted him,” said Zabiullah Mohamedeen, Alam’s brother-in-law. “He had much influence with the people, and through him, the Taliban could influence them as well. He spent most of his life fighting with the Taliban and made many sacrifices. So why arrest him in this manner? This is still a big question for the people.”

‘He’s an honest man’

The arrest itself was carried out sneakily, relatives said.

Alam was ordered by his superiors in Kabul to attend a meeting Jan. 13 in Mazar-e Sharif, a four-hour drive from Maimana. When he arrived, he was taken into custody. The arrangement now seems intended to avoid confrontations with his loyalists in Maimana. Alam was sent to Kabul and placed under house arrest by the Taliban’s intelligence agency, according to relatives and his military allies.

At the time, Inamullah Samangani, a Taliban spokesman, told the BBC’s Persian news service that Alam was arrested over accusations that he had orchestrated the kidnapping of the boy, a case that by then was two years old.

Alam’s fighters were stunned. “I reject these allegations,” said Ehsanullah Toufan, an Uzbek commander of a Taliban base in Maimana and a close friend of Alam’s. “He’s an honest man.”

Alam’s relatives have not seen him since his arrest. They, too, denied the accusations against him and blamed an internal power struggle in which they said rival commanders seeking more of the spoils of victory over the Americans and other foreign forces had spread lies about Alam to the Taliban authorities in Kabul.

“The main problem was the competition for power on the military side,” said Alam’s cousin Mobasher. “Some officials accused him without any evidence. If they have evidence, please show us that the boy was kidnapped by him.”

Mobasher also denied that Alam was hoarding heavy weapons and becoming, in effect, a warlord. “He was committed to the nation,” he said. “He didn’t see the weapons as his personal assets.”

Other close friends, though, said that Alam had grown too powerful too quickly and that the Taliban leadership wanted to curb his growing stature and influence in the north.

“It was not acceptable for the central Taliban,” said Rahimullah Layeq, who had fought alongside Alam for two decades. “So they arrested him.”

When Alam’s supporters heard about the arrest the next day, they were enraged. A group passed Abdullah’s shop and informed him of a meeting at the city’s main mosque. By the time he arrived, hundreds of people had gathered.

Like Abdullah, many viewed the arrest as the latest sign that their community was being marginalized. Many Uzbeks had voted for the Pashtun presidents Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, but afterward, Abdullah said, their governments “forgot us and never served us.”

Since August, they had watched nervously as the Taliban appointed only two Uzbeks among its 33 ministers — the deputy prime minister and the agriculture minister. Some Uzbek language news and cultural programs also have vanished from national television, said the professor and Abdullah.

“Successive governments have looked at us and other ethnic minorities as second-class citizens,” said Khalid, a senior municipal employee, who spoke on the condition that only his middle name be used because he feared reprisals. “The same story is repeating itself with this government, so people went to the street to seek their rights.”

The large protests caught the Taliban off guard. Heavily armed reinforcements were brought in from neighboring provinces. By the next day, Taliban fighters had blocked off streets but agreed to allow the demonstrations. The crowd was much smaller, and many protesters carried weapons. Clashes broke out, leaving two people dead and four injured, according to local officials.

On Jan. 17, the Taliban staged a military parade through the city, showcasing tanks, armored vehicles and hundreds of fighters. It was at once a show of force and a warning to the residents. “They showed their power to the people and everyone understood they would not tolerate any more demonstrations,” Khalid said.

Today, an uneasy calm blankets Maimana. Hundreds who joined the protests have fled the province, fearing arrest by the Taliban. Others remain in hiding, said Abdullah, who hid for several days before emerging because he needed to reopen his shop to provide for his family.

Ferdous, the governor, has urged Alam’s fighters to remain patient and await the outcome of the investigation in Kabul. On Friday, the Taliban’s acting defense minister, Maulvi Muhammad Yaqoob, expressed concern. “Such incidents are creating unrest and divisions within the system,” Yaqoob said, in public remarks made during a visit to the north. “No one should be targeted on the basis of his ethnic background. We should come out of this division.”

But he also warned that “no one has the right to rise up against the decision” of the Taliban to arrest Alam or to punish him if he is found guilty of crimes.

Nevertheless, if Alam is convicted, or if his position within the Taliban is diminished, many residents are bracing for ethnic tensions to flare again.

	“We know these days all the power is with the Pashtun,” Abdullah said. “If they continue the same way, the people are ready to sacrifice themselves again for their rights.”
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HEADLINE	01/31 Teens among 500 dead Syria prison clash
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/31/world/middleeast/syria-prison-isis-boys.html
GIST	<p>HASAKA, Syria — The boy had dark brown hair coated in white dust, and on his chin were the wispy beginnings of a beard.</p> <p>On Sunday, his body and that of another youth were found lying on a dirt road behind the prison in northeastern Syria where a Kurdish-led force, backed by the U.S. military, fought for more than a week to put down an attempt by Islamic State militants to free former fighters held there.</p> <p>The discovery of the bodies was the first confirmation that at least two of up to 700 teenage boys, who had been detained in the prison because they were the children of ISIS fighters, were killed in the fighting.</p> <p>The leader the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, which ran the prison, acknowledged Monday that “a very small number” of the boys had been killed.</p> <p>“Some escaped with the adults,” the commander, known by his nom de guerre Mazlum Kobani, said in an interview, his first since the siege began. “They were either rearrested or were killed.”</p> <p>Some had been held as hostages during the prison siege, according to the S.D.F.</p> <p>A fuller accounting of the ISIS prison siege, and the efforts by the Kurdish-led militia and American forces to put it down, emerged on Monday, a day after the Syrian Democratic Forces, or S.D.F., regained full control over the Sinaa prison in the city of Hasaka.</p> <p>About 500 people were killed, 374 of them linked to ISIS, the S.D.F. said. The death toll also included about 40 S.D.F. fighters, 77 prison staff and guards, and four civilians.</p> <p>The group also said that the ISIS fighters who assaulted the prison had used sleeper cells to aid in the attack, and that the prison assault was part of a larger plot to also attack the giant detention camps in the same region that hold tens of thousands of people, most of them wives and children of ISIS fighters, and the city of Raqqa, once the de facto capital of the Islamic State’s so-called caliphate.</p> <p>The boys had been held at the prison in Hasaka for three years as the international community debated what to do with them.</p> <p>The S.D.F. has said that their ties to the Islamic State made them dangerous, and some of the older ones may have been trained to fight, while human rights organizations consider them victims, children brought to the Islamic State through no choice of their own.</p> <p>Both groups have clamored for the boys’ home countries to repatriate them.</p> <p>Mr. Kobani, the S.D.F. commander, said he had been asking the international community for three years to build rehabilitation centers in his impoverished region. Without better facilities or unless their countries taking them back, he said, there was no where else but the prison to put them.</p> <p>The bodies of the two boys seen by The New York Times on Sunday lay on a dirt road along with the remains of four other corpses, all of them dismembered. All appeared to have been shot.</p> <p>One of them still wore socks made from gray blankets used at the prison. Fragments of orange prison uniforms were strewn nearby.</p>

Some of the neighborhood boys kicked the corpses as they passed by, in a display of the deep hatred that many residents of this area harbor toward ISIS.

Neighborhood residents said the boys were among a group of escaped inmates, most of them Iraqi, who were killed on Friday by the S.D.F. as its troops went door to door to hunt down ISIS fighters.

“Poor kids, they turned them into soldiers,” said a neighbor who did not give her name out of fear for her safety. “We wish they would take them away.”

It was not clear whether the boys had sought to escape with the ISIS fighters or were still being held hostage by them. Several residents said they did not see the boys or the escaped inmates alive and did not know whether any had been armed.

Mr. Kobani said that all of the boys were trained ISIS fighters, an assertion disputed by human rights groups. And he said the boys ranged in age from 15 to 17. Human rights workers have said the boys were as young as 12.

He also appeared to be shocked about a Times report on Sunday that at least 80 bodies were dumped from a front-end loader onto the street and then shoveled into a gravel truck to be taken away to a mass grave.

“This is my first time hearing about it,” Mr. Kobani said. “If this happened, it is a sin.”

The American-led military coalition in northeast Syria, asked about the dead boys and the bodies being dumped, called both “an unfortunate reality” in war.

“The S.D.F. employed the appropriate amount of lethal force to counter the attack and quell the detainee uprising,” the coalition said in a statement. “Time and again they tried to negotiate a full surrender, and used the necessary force to respond to hostile actions.”

“Although the images The New York Times witnessed are disturbing,” the statement added, “they are an unfortunate reality in armed conflict where there are significant casualties and measures must be taken to limit the spread of disease.”

The streets around the prison were littered with the rubble of homes destroyed by security forces who used armored bulldozers and fighting vehicles to kill ISIS fighters and escaped prisoners who refused to surrender. Residents said they saw armored vehicles flying American flags taking part in the operations.

The prison attack drew in U.S. forces and turned into the biggest battle between the American military and ISIS in the three years since the group lost the last remnant of its so-called caliphate, a large swath of territory in Syria and Iraq. The United States conducted airstrikes and provided intelligence and ground troops in Bradley fighting vehicles to support the S.D.F. efforts.

Abu Jassim, another resident who lived in the neighborhood behind the prison, said he returned to his house on Friday and found four escaped inmates there wearing their prison uniforms.

“They said ‘Come in and sit down. Do you know us?’” he recounted. “I said ‘You are the Islamic State’. They said ‘Sit down and don’t interfere.’”

Two of the escaped prisoners were from Iraq while another was from Chechnya, Abu Jassim said. They told him not to be afraid and that they would leave when it got dark. He persuaded them to let him leave the house.

He reported their presence to the S.D.F., which arrived soon after with bulldozers.

“They started to hit the walls until the house fell down,” he said.

Their four bodies were those later seen on the street near those of the two boys.

The S.D.F. said that based on seized ISIS documents and the confessions of captured ISIS leaders, it had determined that the prison attack was part of a much larger plan. If it had succeeded, the S.D.F. said, the group would have attacked surrounding neighborhoods, Raqqa, and the sprawling Al Hol detention camp that holds an estimated 60,000 family members of ISIS fighters.

Al Hol, about 40 miles from Hasaka, is the main detention camp set up to house the families of ISIS fighters detained after the fall of the caliphate three years ago.

S.D.F. factions secure both the exterior and inside of the camp but do not have enough guards to be able to combat increasing ISIS activity there, including frequent murders. Mr. Kobani said that he has asked for more U.S. and coalition support to secure al-Hol and other detention camps and prisons.

Both the camp and the prison lie in an isolated and impoverished breakaway region in northeastern Syria. The S.D.F. has struggled to maintain control over both and has long warned that it cannot safely guard them.

Among the camp residents are several thousand foreign women and children whose home countries have refused to allow them to come back. They live in unsanitary conditions and children have died there of malnutrition and lack of medical care.

One resident living near the prison, a Syrian government employee named Hassoun, said that groups of armed ISIS fighters had forced their way into his home Friday morning and again that night.

Hassoun, who asked to be identified by his first name only out of fears for his safety, said that the gunmen took his phone, flipping through it to see if he was a member of the security forces. All of the militants were Iraqi, he said.

“They were complaining about the internet — they said ‘the Syrian internet is slow’,” Hassoun said.

At one point, he said, one of the gunmen opened the door to check the street and said, “There is an infidel dead.”

It was one of Hassoun’s neighbors, shot by ISIS fighters after they found a photo of him in an S.D.F. uniform during compulsory military service. Relatives identified him as Ghassan Awaf al-Anezi, 20.

“It was horrifying,” Hassoun said. “I was just praying for the sun to rise.”

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HEADLINE	01/31 Fake passports for ISIS to enter Europe, US
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/31/revealed-how-fake-passports-allow-is-members-to-enter-europe-and-us
GIST	<p>A booming online industry specialising in fake passports with official visas and travel stamps is offering people with links to Islamic State the opportunity to leave Syria and travel onwards to the UK, EU, Canada and the US, a Guardian investigation has found.</p> <p>One such network, run by an Uzbek with extremist links living in Turkey, is now selling high-quality fake passports for up to \$15,000 (£11,132) purporting to be from various countries. In at least 10 cases the Guardian is aware of, people who illegally crossed the Syrian border into Turkey have used his products to depart through Istanbul airport.</p> <p>Sellers claim the EU is the most popular destination but say in at least two cases people were able to travel from Istanbul to Mexico on fake Russian passports and, from there, illegally over the border into the US. Niger and Mauritania are also popular destinations, as are Ukraine and Afghanistan.</p>

The Uzbek's business is doing so well he recently opened a new channel on the encrypted messaging app Telegram with the official-sounding name "Istanbul Global Consulting". The growing trade suggests that dangerous extremists could be slipping under the radar of security services around the world, escaping justice for past crimes and potentially able to continue terrorist activity in countries other than Syria.

"I do not ask about which group someone is with. I am willing to work with anyone," the Uzbek said in a message chat with the Guardian, which posed as an interested client. "It is not my job to see who is bad and who is not. The security services should deal with it."

Western security officials warned in 2015 that IS had managed to obtain significant equipment such as blank passport books and printers to make Syrian and Iraqi passports, which it used to disguise operatives among the more than 1 million people who fled to Europe during the peak of the refugee crisis. IS claimed several attacks around the continent shortly after, including the November 2015 attack on the Bataclan theatre in Paris and the Manchester Arena bombing in 2017.

Since then, European border agencies have invested in technology and personnel training to better identify forged passports. In 2020, Tajikistan totally overhauled its consular staff in Istanbul and document system in an attempt to stamp out the use of fake Tajik passports.

But in response, sellers of fake passports have also upped their game, using a wider variety of nationalities for prospective clients.

The Uzbek sent several videos of his wares, including crisp new French, Belgian, Bulgarian and Russian passports that appear to feature authentic security watermarks and holograms.

When placed under a black light, two Russian passports contain UV-sensitive materials designed to stop passport forgery, and a Belgian passport placed on a scanner similar to those used in airports appears to read correctly, with the holder's details appearing on the monitor.

According to document sellers, it is impossible to fake a working biometric chip, but at many border crossings officials checking passports simply ignore those that don't work, waving the passport holder through.

"There is a particular seller in Turkey who provides IS members with very high level [ie, well forged] documents," using interlocutors who speak Russian, Arabic and other languages to cater for different clients, said a source at the US Department of Homeland Security.

"We are aware of IS members using these fake passports to cross to Europe, and European security is not successful in arresting them all."

While the document sellers' most popular service is providing documents for foreign fighters in Syria associated with IS and other armed groups to travel to Europe, the group has also identified new areas to expand.

On a Telegram chat for people in al-Hawl, a camp in north-east Syria home to about 60,000 women and children with links to IS, one of the Uzbek's online marketers, a foreign woman detained in another camp nearby, has posted: "If you need fake documents from Russia, Central Asia, Turkey, Europe, DM me."

The fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban had also created a new client base of Afghan refugees in Turkey, the Uzbek said. Although his services are too expensive for most displaced Afghans, he says his clients use the fake passports to board flights to western countries, and then claim asylum once they land.

While low-ranked IS fighters usually barely have money to buy one passport, high-level members who want to completely drop off the grid usually buy several documents from different countries, and use them to move around frequently, changing passport for every new flight or transfer, said a Russian passport seller.

A Russian national who fought for IS until 2015 said: “I had only a couple of hundred dollars when I came from Syria so I bought the cheapest passport – a really poor-quality Tajik passport. It did not work and I was arrested in the airport in Istanbul.

“Then my family back home collected enough money to buy a better-quality one. So I got a real Russian passport, but with my photo on it, and was able to get to Ukraine with it. It is a really good one – I was once stopped by police in Ukraine and they took it but returned it to me a week later saying everything is good. Unfortunately this passport is expiring now so I am currently trying to get money to buy a new one.”

To make sure a person disappears completely, for \$500 the Uzbek seller can even offer a Turkish death certificate that can be sent to their home country’s consulate. “Unless you are Abu Bakr Baghdadi [The IS leader, killed in 2019] no one would go to the morgue to check if you really died. They would just accept that document and enter it into the system,” he said.

There are several passport options, depending on the clients’ ethnicity, languages they speak, where they want to go, and how much they have to spend. The cheapest documents with which to get to Europe are Russian, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan passports, which cost about \$5,000, or \$6,000 as part of a Schengen visa package. Other popular and slightly more expensive options are Ukrainian and Moldovan papers, which allow visa-free travel to the EU.

The most expensive option is an EU passport, which will set a client back \$8,000, usually requested by westerners and Arabs who speak some French and can pass for French or Belgian. Typically, an EU citizen arrives in Turkey on his or her own passport, sells it to the Uzbek and his colleagues for about €2,500, then the passport photo is changed to that of a client. The original owner of the passport then claims it has been lost and applies for a replacement at his or her consulate in Istanbul.

The passports are printed in their countries of origin and taken to the country where the client is waiting, where they receive official border entry stamps, which helps cement the legitimacy of the document.

“The passport itself relatively doesn’t cost anything. What does cost is the stamps,” said the Russian seller. “The majority of the money goes into bribes for stamps.”

“In the past the quality of passports on the market was bad so there was a limited number of countries one could travel to from Syria,” he said. “Now those passports are of such good quality that if you have enough money, you could go absolutely anywhere.”

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HEADLINE	01/31 Taliban amnesty? UN: extrajudicial killings
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/31/afghanistan-more-than-100-believed-killed-despite-taliban-amnesty-offer-says-un
GIST	<p>The United Nations says it has received “credible allegations” that more than 100 members of the ousted Afghan government, its security forces and those who worked with international troops have been killed since the Taliban took over on 15 August.</p> <p>Secretary general Antonio Guterres said in a report that “more than two thirds” of the deaths were alleged to have resulted from extrajudicial killings by the Taliban or its affiliates, despite the Taliban’s announcement of “general amnesties” for those affiliated with the former government and US-led coalition forces.</p>

The UN political mission in [Afghanistan](#) also received “credible allegations of extrajudicial killings of at least 50 individuals suspected of affiliation with Isil-KP”, the Islamic State extremist group operating in Afghanistan, Guterres said in the report to the UN security council.

In the report, obtained by the Associated Press on Sunday, he added that despite Taliban assurances, the UN political mission had also received credible allegations “of enforced disappearances and other violations impacting the right to life and physical integrity” of former government and coalition members.

Guterres said human rights defenders and media workers also continue “to come under attack, intimidation, harassment, arbitrary arrest, ill-treatment and killings”.

Eight civil society activists were killed, including three by the Taliban and three by Islamic State extremists, and 10 were subjected to temporary arrests, beatings and threats by the Taliban, he said. Two journalists were killed – one by IS – and two were injured by unknown armed men.

The secretary general said the UN missions documented 44 cases of temporary arrests, beatings and threats of intimidation, 42 of them by the Taliban.

The Taliban overran most of Afghanistan as US and Nato forces were in the final stages of their chaotic withdrawal from the country after 20 years. They entered Kabul on 15 August without any resistance from the Afghan army or the country’s president, Ashraf Ghani, who fled.

The Taliban initially promised a general amnesty for those linked to the former government and international forces, and tolerance and inclusiveness towards women and ethnic minorities. However, the Taliban have renewed restrictions on women and appointed an all-male government, which have met with dismay by the international community.

Afghanistan’s aid-dependent economy was already stumbling when the Taliban seized power, and the international community froze Afghanistan’s assets abroad and halted economic support, recalling the Taliban’s reputation for brutality during its 1996-2001 rule and refusal to educate girls and allow women to work.

Guterres said: “The situation in Afghanistan remains precarious and uncertain six months after the Taliban takeover as the multiple political, socio-economic and humanitarian shocks reverberate across the country.”

He said Afghanistan today faces multiple crises: a growing humanitarian emergency, a massive economic contraction, the crippling of its banking and financial systems, the worst drought in 27 years and the Taliban’s failure to form an inclusive government and restore the rights of girls to education and women to work.

“An estimated 22.8 million people are projected to be in ‘crisis’ and ‘emergency’ levels of food insecurity until March 2022,” the UN chief said. “Almost 9 million of these will be at ‘emergency’ levels of food insecurity – the highest number in the world. Half of all children under five are facing acute malnutrition.”

On a positive note, Guterres reported “a significant decline” in the overall number of conflict-related security incidents as well as civilian casualties since the Taliban takeover. The UN recorded 985 security-related incidents between 19 August and 31 December, a 91% decrease compared with the same period in 2020, he said.

The eastern, central, southern and western regions accounted for 75% of all recorded incidents, he said, with Nangarhar, Kabul, Kunar and Kandahar ranking as the most conflict-affected provinces.

Despite the reduction in violence, Guterres said the Taliban faced several challenges, including rising attacks against their members.

	<p>“Some are attributed to the National Resistance Front comprising some Afghan opposition figures, and those associated with the former government,” he said. “These groups have been primarily operating in Panjshir province and Baghlan’s Andarab district but have not made significant territorial inroads”, although “armed clashes are regularly documented, along with forced displacement and communication outages”.</p> <p>Guterres said intra-Taliban tensions along ethnic lines and competition over jobs had also resulted in violence, pointing to armed clashes on 4 November between between Taliban forces in Bamyan city.</p> <p>In the report, the secretary general proposed priorities for the UN political mission in the current environment, urged international support to prevent widespread hunger and the country’s economic collapse, and urged the Taliban to guarantee women’s rights and human rights.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/01 Taliban bring heavy hand in security role
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/taliban-raised-war-bring-heavy-hand-security-role-82594456
GIST	<p>KABUL, Afghanistan -- As they headed home at night from a wedding, everyone in the car went quiet when they approached the checkpoint in Kabul manned by two Taliban with automatic rifles.</p> <p>One of the fighters shone a light into the car. Fatima Abdullahi was in the backseat, her two children perched on her lap, squeezed between her younger sister Zainab and a work colleague. The fighter waved them through.</p> <p>Seconds later, two shots rang out. Zainab slumped against her sister. Abdullahi screamed, pleading with her to wake up. Zainab, 25, was dead.</p> <p>“I took her face in my hands but she didn’t move. Then I saw behind her there was blood, and she had been shot,” Abdullahi recounted to The Associated Press.</p> <p>Taliban officials say the Jan. 13 shooting was a mix-up, with one guard not realizing the other had given the car the go ahead to leave. Both guards have been arrested, and the Taliban administration apologized for the killings, going to the home of Zainab’s parents, promising them justice and giving them 600,000 afghanis (\$5,825).</p> <p>But Zainab’s death highlights one dilemma facing Afghanistan’s new rulers as they move from waging an insurgency to governing. The Taliban are trying to keep discipline over thousands of young fighters who are bringing heavy-handed methods of war into their new roles as security forces. Those young men know only war, most have no schooling and cannot read or write. Their only skill is fighting; their weapons are as familiar to them as their mobile telephones.</p> <p>In the urbanized capital of Kabul, many people are afraid of them. Five months after sweeping to power, Taliban can still be seen packed into the back of pickup trucks, their weapons protruding skyward, roaming the Kabul streets. The numbers are fewer than when they first took the city, but they are still highly visible.</p> <p>Demobilizing the fighters is difficult since they have few alternatives. “Too many fighters lack the education and training to join civilian life, and even those that do have the skills can’t find jobs, due to the economic crisis,” said Michael Kugelman, deputy director of the Asia Program at the U.S.-based Wilson Center.</p> <p>At the family’s home in the minority Shiite-dominated west Kabul, Zainab’s mother Mariam says she cries most days and finds herself staring at the door, expecting Zainab to return.</p> <p>Zainab was to be married in two months. Even as the Taliban restricted women working, she continued working as an auditor for a local charity, where her sister Fatima also worked.</p>

“She was my last child, adorable. They could have killed me, not my Zainab,” said Mariam, keeping warm by a coal burner in Kabul’s winter cold. “If I was in the car and they fired, I would have covered her so that the bullet would have hit me.” Zainab’s father Nadir Ali sat nearby wrapped in a woolen blanket, his legs weak. Mariam says he can no longer work, and Zainab provided the only income.

It is not just individual Taliban fighters with a heavy hand, as their leadership deals with dissent. The Taliban have dispersed women protesters using pepper spray or firing in the air. They have beaten and arrested journalists. Particularly frightening in recent weeks have been night raids by intelligence officials on the homes of protesters to arrest them.

Obaidullah Baheer, a social activist and lecturer at the American University of Afghanistan, expressed fears the Taliban were adopting the tactics of past Afghan intelligence agencies.

The agencies have history of brutality dating back to the 1980s’ pro-communist government, when hundreds were rounded up and killed, many dumped in mass graves. After the 2001 ouster of the Taliban, the intelligence agency known as the National Directorate of Security — which received U.S. support — detained thousands of Afghans alleged to be Taliban. Hundreds disappeared in so-called black sites where torture was carried out, according to rights groups.

The Taliban have formed their own General Directorate of Intelligence.

“We often times expect the victim to be the first to sympathize with pain and prevent it when in power, but often times they end up pushing it one notch further,” said Baheer. “The Taliban must realize that this Deep State behavior will further alienate the population in the long run.”

Skeptical world leaders have been watching how the Taliban transition to governing at a time when Afghanistan is facing a collapsing economy and widespread hunger. So far, the Taliban have been doing so firmly on their own terms — trying to adjust to realities that prevent them from ruling as they did in the past but also refusing to give others a role in governing.

There are signs that the interim Taliban Cabinet is trying to inject some order into their ranks.

Many fighters now wear the camouflage uniforms of the previous Afghan Defense and Security Forces. Latfullah Hakimi, head of the Taliban’s so-called Purification Commission tasked with investigating complaints about its fighters, told The Associated Press that thousands of former Taliban have been jailed or dismissed for a variety of offenses ranging from corruption to intimidation.

The leadership has sought to limit the harshest punishments for which the Taliban were notorious when they first ruled the country, over 20 years ago — such as public executions of murderers and hand amputations for thieves.

In their first months in power this time, low-level commanders often implemented impromptu punishments for alleged crimes, such as publicly humiliating thieves. Now, more suspects are brought to courts where judges make decisions. The judges are Taliban-approved figures with religious training, operating with little transparency, but their rulings do to some extent rein in vigilante acts by individual fighters.

The Taliban have been less successful in convincing former members of the military to return to service. Few have heeded the call, too afraid to admit their previous military positions amid some revenge killings of former officers.

Taliban leaders have publicly forbidden revenge attacks, and — with some exceptions — have been relatively successful in curbing them, “remarkably so, by the historical standards not only of Afghanistan, but of most civil wars,” said Anatol Lieven, a senior research fellow at the Quincy Institute of Responsible Statecraft.

Return to Top	<p>“I expected far more revenge killings,” said Lieven, who has followed Afghanistan through its four decades of war.</p> <p>For many Afghans, the Taliban remain a frightening sight in the cities. Social media are ablaze with videos and photos of alleged Taliban excesses such as threatening people or detaining people from homes.</p> <p>Some, however, are doctored, like a video that showed a Taliban fighter cutting a man’s hair and saying he was enforcing a new rule requiring all young men to keep their hair short. The original of the video, which the AP saw, was of a Taliban fighter catching a thief in the act and punishing him with public humiliation by cutting his hair. The Taliban, many of whom have shoulder length hair themselves, have not launched a campaign of cutting hair.</p> <p>As the world watches the Taliban deal with ruling, Lieven cautioned that given its record in Afghanistan, the West may not have the answers.</p> <p>“After the experience of Western-directed state-building in Afghanistan the past 20 years, is the West in any position to say what the right direction for Afghanistan is?” Lieven said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Feds: arrest; sought attacks in US for ISIS
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/american-woman-arrested-allegedly-trained-women-isis/story?id=82566924
GIST	<p>A Kansas woman was charged with providing material support to ISIS, according to charges unsealed by the Justice Department on Friday night.</p> <p>On six separate occasions between 2014 and 2017, authorities say Allison Fluke-Ekren, 42, allegedly expressed interest in carrying out terrorist attacks in the United States in support of ISIS, the foreign terrorist organization that's based in Iraq, Syria and other locations in Africa and the Middle East.</p> <p>Fluke-Ekren moved to Syria in 2012 and married a "prominent" ISIS leader, court documents said. She can reportedly speak four languages, and the documents alleged she rose up the ranks to command her own battalion.</p> <p>"Fluke-Ekren's main objective in this role was to teach the women of ISIS how to defend themselves against ISIS' enemies," the complaint stated.</p> <p>"There are American citizens who want to do damage to our country and whether they're here inside the country, trying to commit attacks or outside of the country," Tony Mattivi, the former DOJ National Security Coordinator for the District of Kansas said.</p> <p>She also allegedly housed, translated for and trained women to fire automatic weapons, the Justice Department said.</p> <p>"Recent charges brought against Allison Fluke-Ekren demonstrate the appeal ISIS had to a broad section of foreign extremists around the world, including women and those from the United States," said Javed Ali, former senior counterterrorism director at the National Security Council and a professor at the University of Michigan's Ford School of Public Policy.</p> <p>"Despite their similar jihadist outlooks, unlike al Qaida, ISIS held little to no prohibitions for more operational roles for women in the group, and there were many other women who performed similar functions in ISIS like Fluke-Ekren," Ali told ABC News.</p> <p>Among the attacks she was interested in carrying out were ideas to bomb a mall and a college in the U.S. "To conduct the attack, Fluke-Ekren explained that she could go to a shopping mall in the United States, park a vehicle full of explosives in the basement or parking garage level of the structure, and detonate the explosives in the vehicle with a cellphone triggering device, " she allegedly told a witness, according to court documents.</p>

	<p>Fluke-Ekren also allegedly once presented an FBI informant with a plan "targeting a U.S.-based college." She "stated that they would dress like infidels and drop off a backpack with explosives," court documents said.</p> <p>She also "fantasized" about committing an attack where there was a large amount of people, the documents stated.</p> <p>"Fluke-Ekren considered any attack that did not kill a large number of individuals to be a waste of resources," they said.</p> <p>The documents against Fluke-Ekren were filed in 2019.</p> <p>She was arrested in Syria and is expected to make her first federal court appearance in Alexandria, Virginia, on Monday, when she will be appointed an attorney.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Kenya: 13 killed; heightened terror threat
SOURCE	https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/north-eastern/article/2001436044/13-killed-after-vehicle-ran-over-ied-in-mandera
GIST	<p>About thirteen people have been confirmed dead in Arabia, Mandera County, after a minibus ran over an improvised landmine, setting off an explosion.</p> <p>County authorities have told The Standard that the vehicle was headed to Mandera town.</p> <p>Eyewitnesses at the scene say the incident took place today at around 6am.</p> <p>"Everything moved so fast, we heard a bhang and when we got here we saw smoke all over," Mohammed Abdi said.</p> <p>Over the weekend, the US Embassy issued a terror alert in Kenya, urging vigilance in public places hours.</p> <p>That was hours after the government had announced heightened security to forestall possible terror threats.</p> <p>Prior to that, the Dutch, German, French and UK consulates in the country issued similar warnings on Thursday, January 27.</p> <p>"There is the potential for increased crime and acts of violent extremism in Kenya this time of year. The US Embassy reminds the public of the continued need for sustained vigilance in public locations such as shopping malls, hotels, airports, clubs, restaurants, transportation hubs, schools, places of worship and other areas frequented by tourists," the Embassy said on its official website on Friday, January 28.</p> <p>"Public events, such as demonstrations and celebratory gatherings, are also at a higher risk for violence," said the American consulate.</p> <p>To reduce the risk of exposure, the US advised its citizens to "exercise vigilance at events, places of worship, and locations with large crowds; review personal security plans and monitor local media for updates".</p> <p>After the UK, Dutch, German and French embassies in Kenya issued terror alerts on Thursday, Kenya's National Police Service on Friday said it had heightened security surveillance countrywide.</p>
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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	01/31 Seattle activist: shoplifting justified
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3329808/rantz-seattle-activists-admire-shoplifting/
GIST	<p>While reasonable Seattleites see shoplifting as a serious problem that is destroying businesses and hurting our quality of life, local activists think it's bold and justified.</p> <p>The downtown Seattle Target has been the target of shoplifters multiple times a day. Target is not alone. Large and small retail businesses in the area experience a stream of shoplifters. Some of it is organized crime, and much of it is driven by homeless criminals. Businesses are going under, in part, because of this crime.</p> <p>But not everyone thinks it's a big deal. Some want to defend or downplay the theft.</p> <p>Blogger for The Stranger admires shoplifting</p> <p>Hannah Krieg is a blogger with The Stranger, an alt-weekly that previously begged for money to stay afloat. You would think they understand the difficulties of running a business in Seattle. But when it comes to homeless shoplifters, they get inspired.</p> <p>John Ray Lomack is a prolific shoplifter who is charged with brazenly stealing a 70" television from Target. It was all caught on video surveillance. Kreig thought it was pretty cool.</p> <p>"You gotta admire the boldness of walking out with a box the size of a smart car," Kreig wrote.</p> <p>After learning Lomack was released on his own personal recognizance, despite his nearly four-decades worth of criminal behavior, Kreig offered to buy light-on-crime Judge Kuljinder Dhillon a drink. Then she implies low-income and poor people are criminals and that Target will survive, so it's no big deal.</p> <p>"Rantz said this judge is notoriously easy on homeless people, which seems fair — crime is often a symptom of poverty, and I think Target will survive the damage," she writes. "But of course, so many people need a pound of flesh when a poor person does something silly that hurts no human person."</p> <p>I'm not sure if it's ignorance or anti-Semitism for her to use the Shylock reference in response to this Jewish host's article.</p> <p>These are arguments of a dullard</p> <p>Crime isn't a symptom of poverty, and neither is this kind of shoplifting.</p> <p>Progressives who justify lawlessness often couch their dangerous views under the guise of defending so-called "crimes of poverty."</p> <p>They claim these are crimes people commit just to stay alive. They frame their positions in ways to make themselves sound like heroes standing up for the poor. But they're villains standing up for criminals. Lomack isn't accused of stealing a sandwich because he was hungry.</p> <p>Further, the idea that Target "will survive" is the position of a blind ideology whose hatred of corporations has developed into delusion. And in fairness, Kreig is not the only one to generate such a witless take.</p> <p>The activists who want to defund the police so criminals can get away with shoplifting — and more — echo the belief that Target can weather the storm. DivestSPD on Twitter ran its usual Kshama Sawant talking points about evil "giant corporations" their friends either shop at or rob.</p> <p>It's not a one-off</p> <p>Kreig argues as if this is just one instance of shoplifting.</p>

Target is victimized all day, every day, according to staff. And if their stores are constantly targeted for crime, if they can't keep employees safe, if they can't turn a profit, or if it becomes a legal liability, they close. And while activists love to think all corporations can weather a global pandemic, the reality is much different.

Perhaps she's new to the city, but some of those big corporations she loathes are going bankrupt and/or leaving Seattle. J. Crew, Forever 21, Brooks Brothers, and Sur La Table are out of Seattle. Macy's is gone, too, if she hadn't noticed. Columbia Sportswear? Closed.

Those closures mean jobs are lost. Not every business sets up a beg-athon to stay operational like The Stranger.

Kreig seems to think this crisis only impacts big businesses, but it doesn't. Shoplifters aren't going after the "giant corporations." They're going after the little guys, too.

Small business owners cry out for help

Jay Ashberg's small, local business — Seattle Shirt Company — is constantly hit by homeless and other vandals.

"During the day, we've got people trying to shoplift all the time. And then at night, ... there's been in the last three, four months, we've had our glass broken three or four times and three actual burglaries," Ashberg told the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH. "And two were literally one night after the next ... And then one was like three, four months ago. So we've had three burglaries, but we've never in 30 years [prior] had any burglaries at all."

Nearby Sneaker City, a mom-and-pop shoe store that's been downtown for 20 years, is calling it quits. The crime has become too much. In the last two years, the store suffered at least 15 break-ins.

"Our doors were broken into multiple times so we stopped replacing the glass," owner Caroline Cho told [KOMO](#) News.

But to Krieg, these are just examples of "poor" people doing "something silly that hurts no human person."

Vibrancy actually matters

Seattle activists simultaneously downplay the homelessness crime crisis, while blaming the big corporations they frequent or work for.

Maybe without Target, or even Amazon, the city would be better, they claim. It'll be filled with small businesses that don't just have Seattle character, but will pay a living wage! Sure, The Stranger couldn't pay livable wages without handouts but Sneaker City getting broken into daily? They'll survive!

A mix of retail — big and small — brings residents and tourists to neighborhoods. It's what helps create vibrancy downtown. Unfortunately, that hasn't existed in Seattle for years. It's not safe or pleasant to visit downtown Seattle, and outlets like The Stranger, instead of putting pressure on city leaders to do something, advocate for approaches that have made the problem worse.

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HEADLINE	01/31 Flooding losses to spike 26% by 2050
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/01/31/climate-change-flooding-united-states/
GIST	Climate change will cause the nation's flooding losses to jump more than 26 percent over the next three decades, with disadvantaged communities shouldering an outsize share of the economic burden, a study published Monday predicted.

Researchers at the University of Bristol in Britain used data from flood insurance claims, building records, the census and other sources to forecast how a warming planet will affect flooding patterns across the United States, and pinpoint which communities might see the most change.

The study, published in the journal *Nature Climate Change*, estimates that the annual cost of flooding in the United States will increase 26.4 percent — from \$32.1 billion to \$40.6 billion — by 2050. But the forecast assumes nations will reduce planet-warming emissions roughly in line with the targets agreed upon at the recent COP26 climate summit. If those targets aren't met, the costs could be even greater.

It's the latest scientific research to show the myriad ways in which rising temperatures associated with climate change could reshape society, destroy homes and infrastructure, and endanger lives.

A [2021 study](#) from German researchers predicts that the occurrence and intensity of extreme flood events will grow as global temperatures rise. A U.N. [study](#) last year warned of "profound consequences" for people and nature alike if the crisis is not brought under control.

The new study also is in line with other research to suggest underrepresented groups will disproportionately feel the effects of climate change. The Environmental Protection Agency has [said](#) members of minority groups will incur more deaths from extreme heat as well as more flooding-related property losses.

The most-pronounced flood risk now rests with impoverished White communities, the Bristol study concluded. But their findings suggest Black communities will see their flooding costs increase twice as quickly moving forward, largely for geographic reasons.

The southeastern United States, which is home to large Black populations, is expected to experience more hurricanes as temperatures continue to rise. Flooding costs are expected to increase 49 percent in Jackson, Miss., for example, and 24 percent in far-inland Montgomery, Ala., according to an [interactive map](#) the authors published on the academic news site the Conversation.

"Poorer, Whiter communities bear that historical flood risk, but the people that are bearing a disproportionate burden of those new risks are typically Black communities across the Southeast," said Oliver Wing, a research fellow with the school of geographical sciences at University of Bristol, who was the study's lead author.

The sharpest cost increases are projected to occur in the Southeast, along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts.

Flood damages are expected to spike 372 percent in Cameron County, on the southernmost tip of Texas. In Miami-Dade County, Fla., the forecast is 50.9 percent. Several southern Louisiana counties could see tenfold jumps.

But the forecast also points to possible hot spots far inland, in mountainous areas like Teton County, Wyo., and Grant County, Wash., where costs are expected to jump 20.5 and 23.8 percent respectively. Comparatively low-lying Albemarle County, Va., home to Charlottesville, is expected to see its flooding costs increase by about a third.

Meanwhile, other areas in the middle of the country could be little changed, and some could experience fewer floods as they become more dry.

In a teleconference Monday, two of the study's authors said their research highlights how zoning boards, mortgage lenders and developers — any entity with sway over where things get built — need to do a better job of considering flood risk in their assessments. That includes whether a particular plot might become a flood plain over the course of a 30-year mortgage.

The estimated \$32.1 billion in 2020 flood damage is not just a benchmark to measure climate-related devastation, the authors said; it's also a measure of how the existing property development system already fails to protect people from disasters.

"Our planning system doesn't sufficiently screen out risky development," said Paul Bates, a Bristol hydrologist who studies the science of flooding.

As the population grows and the Earth continues to warm, protecting lives and property might require a rethinking of where we build and where we live. "Humans have generally settled around rivers," Wing said. "But that doesn't take away from the fact that they can be fundamentally dangerous places to live."

Inland flooding events cost more than any other severe weather event. Such disasters been the leading cause of death associated with tropical cyclones, according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Last year in the rural riverside community of Waverly, Tenn., for example, flash-flooding caused by torrential downpours killed 21 people as places not considered floodplains were submerged.

The White House has [said](#) it will work to revise building standards for flood-prone communities nationwide, as well as launch new tools to make climate information more accessible to the public. FEMA has been [exploring](#) how it could update flood plain management standards, which have been largely unchanged in more than four decades.

The authors said flood costs will grow even if governments around the globe are able to dramatically decarbonize the environment starting immediately.

"These impacts are so near-term that climate mitigation (that is, decarbonization) is futile, meaning we can only adapt to this increasing risk in areas currently developed," the authors wrote. "We thus have to adapt to both the now and the future."

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HEADLINE	01/31 Record 477mile-long lightning 'megaflash'
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/world-record-477-mile-long-lightning-megaflash-confirmed-over-u-s/
GIST	<p>The World Meteorological Organization announced on Monday that it had confirmed two lightning "megaflash" records. The findings, which come after careful data-checking and rigorous certification processes, include one record event that occurred over the Lower 48 states.</p> <p>On April 29, 2020, a sprawling mass of strong to severe thunderstorms produced a 477.2-mile-long lightning strike over the southern United States. It stretched from near Houston to southeast Mississippi. The record beats a 440-mile-long megaflash that occurred over southern Brazil on Halloween of 2018.</p> <p>The WMO also identified a world record for the long-lasting lightning flash. It lit up the skies over Uruguay and northern Argentina for 17.1 seconds on June 18, 2020, surpassing a 16.73-second flash recorded over northern Argentina on March 4, 2019.</p> <p>"These are extraordinary records from single lightning flash events," wrote Randall Cerveney, rapporteur of Weather and Climate Extremes for WMO, in a statement.</p> <p>Megaflashes dwarf ordinary lightning strikes. We're accustomed to seeing what's going on near the ground, including conventional cloud to ground lightning bolts. Hundreds or thousands such strikes might accompany a run-of-the-mill thunderstorm on a summer's afternoon.</p> <p>Megaflashes are different. They're enormous. They snake through regions of high electric field and can travel for hundreds of miles while lasting more than 10 seconds. Since most storm clouds are fewer than 10 miles high, lightning can't grow terribly long in the vertical direction. But megaflashes have plenty of space to sprawl in the horizontal.</p>

All megaflashes accompany MCSs, or mesoscale convective systems. MCSs are clusters of thunderstorms that often rage overnight and can occupy an area the size of several states, last for hours and stretch 750 miles or more end-to-end. They're a staple of the spring and early summer across the southern and central United States, and are also common in Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay. South America's "Altiplano," or high Andean Plateau, also brews prolific lightning-producing storms.

Megaflashes crawl through the clouds, but can produce or induce ground connections at various points. Sometimes MCSs merge, leading to amplified and more chaotic electric fields that can also be supportive of megaflashes. Covering so much real estate means megaflashes flicker for an extended duration.

While atmospheric electrodynamicists had long since theorized about the existence of megaflashes, the scale and duration of said flashes was not well-understood until recently. Conventional lightning detection arrays, which rely on a network of ground-based sensors that detect a strike's electromagnetic field and use multistation triangulation to determine its location, are most effective in plotting cloud to ground discharges.

"Detecting these extreme lightning events is very difficult due to their exceptional rarity and scale," wrote Michael Peterson of the Space and Remote Sensing Group at Los Alamos National Laboratory, in an email. "Your sensor has to be in just the right place at perfectly the right time to be able to see it — and the instrument has to be capable of measuring something as large as a megaflash. Most sensors historically have fallen short of these requirements."

That changed with the Nov. 19, 2016, launch of the GOES East weather satellite, soon followed by GOES West. Both peer down on North America from 22,236 miles above Earth, and have "Geostationary Lightning Mappers," or instruments that are able to discern the infrared signal associated with a lightning flash. That allows for the tracking of cloud to cloud and intracloud flashes from above.

Similar satellite-mounted devices existed before GOES East and West, but were only able to scan smaller swaths and for shorter time windows. In fact, GOES satellites' Geostationary lightning Mappers capture one image every 2 milliseconds; Europe and China will be deploying similar space-born sensors in the coming years.

There's reason to believe that megaflashes may be more common than once believed. Now that scientists are able to spot and resolve them over North America, they're able to begin constructing a catalogue of events.

One particularly impressive discharge, which eventually spanned 300 miles but was not evaluated by the WMO, occurred on the morning of Oct. 23, 2017. A thunderstorm was raging near Thackerville, Okla., a little more than an hour's drive north of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex. A lightning strike illuminated skies near the Red River — Oklahoma's southern border — at 12:13 a.m.

At the same time, the landscape was also aglow near Burlington, Kansas; the same massive 300 mile-long lightning bolt had illuminated an area four times larger than the state of Connecticut.

"Now that we have a robust record of these monster flashes, we can begin to understand how they occur and appreciate the disproportionate impact that they have," wrote Peterson in the WMO release. He served as the lead author of the WMO's report.

The organization has also been keeping tabs on other lightning records, and used the latest announcement as an opportunity to underscore the importance of lightning safety. Any time thunder can be heard, an individual is close enough to be struck by lightning.

"The only lightning-safe locations are substantial buildings that have wiring and plumbing; not structures such as at a beach or bus stop," wrote Ron Holle, a lightning specialist and member of the committee. "As

	<p>these extreme cases show, lightning can arrive within seconds over a long distance, but they are embedded within larger thunderstorms, so be aware.”</p> <p>With a new generation of detection capabilities rolling out and proliferating around the world, lightning scientists expect there’s much more waiting to be discovered.</p> <p>“I don’t think we know for sure just how big megaflashes can get,” wrote Chris Vagasky, a lightning specialist at Vaisala, in an email. “Before we had the Geostationary Lightning Mapper, the longest length and the longest duration flashes were measured using Lightning Mapping Arrays. Those records were more than doubled by [these records].”</p> <p>Vagasky noted that, even with scheduled satellite launches upcoming, “we’ll still be missing portions of Southeast Asia, like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, and we’ll be missing much of Australia.” That leaves out an enormous area that could be home to megaflashes.</p> <p>Peterson agrees.</p> <p>“It is likely that these records of 768 km and 17.102 s(econds) are not the final word on extreme lighting,” he wrote in his email.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 ‘Winter’ disappears from Winter Games
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/winter-olympics-sports-environment-and-nature-beijing-environment-db61d01a980bdbcc862523547aaada
GIST	<p>BEAVER CREEK, Colo. (AP) — Ski racers settling into the start gate for Alpine World Cup events in the Rocky Mountains in early December squinted through sunshine that carried the temperature toward 50 degrees and glanced down at a course covered with pristine — and manufactured — snow.</p> <p>If they looked up and across the way, beyond the finish line, they saw adjacent hills that were brown and barren as can be, with nary a trace of powder or any indication that this was a setting for athletes who would be heading to the Beijing Olympics that begin Feb. 4.</p> <p>It is a troubling reality and — given their own reliance on the production of snow, continent-hopping flights powered by diesel fuel and other environment-unfriendly offshoots of their careers — hard-to-reconcile push-and-pull for many of those who will be competing in Alpine skiing or freestyle skiing or snowboarding or Nordic combined events or other outdoor sports that helped put the disappearing “Winter” in Winter Games.</p> <p>“Climate change is here. It’s happening. We’re living in it right now. It’s not something that’s going to be in the distant future. It’s here. And you see it with the fires in California, floods in Europe, higher snow levels, shorter winters, longer summers, droughts. It runs the whole gamut. Everywhere in the world is having some effect from it. And there’s not really any turning back,” said Travis Ganong, a 33-year-old from California going to China with the U.S. ski team.</p> <p>“Selfishly, I hope winters are here in the future,” he said. “But it’s not looking good.”</p> <p>Global warming is altering, and endangering, his and other sports, perhaps permanently, and not just at the elite level. It affects folks who just want to ski or snowboard for fun and those who make a living from places offering such activities.</p> <p>And, well, everyone on the planet, of course, because this affects far more than sports, of course.</p> <p>Just one example: In December, Colorado set a record that stood since the 1880s for most consecutive days without snow. After warm temperatures and just an inch of snowfall by Dec. 30, wind-fueled wildfires destroyed hundreds of homes in the state.</p>

[The last eight years rank as the eight hottest](#) on record for Earth, according to two U.S. science agencies, NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

“The glaciers are receding. The winter is starting later and ending sooner,” said John Kucera, the 2009 world champion in downhill who now is a coach for Canada’s Alpine team. “For a sport like ours, we might pay for it sooner than some others. We are dependent on the climate and the weather and that dictates what we’re able to do.”

The fallout is widespread.

It’s harder to find glaciers suitable for training, so athletes need to search for new locales — or even head indoors. It’s harder to hold World Cup events, because too much wind or too much snow or too little snow leads to postponements or cancellations.

It’s harder to find real snow anywhere, so competition increasingly comes on machine-made snow, which has its own deleterious effects on the environment. While the high speeds, steep inclines and sharp angles make danger a constant presence in Alpine skiing, no matter what sort of stuff is underfoot, [injury-causing crashes are increasingly common in Nordic skiing and biathlon](#) because the snow created by people produces harder, slicker tracks.

“We definitely have noticed a lack of snow everywhere. Places that, in December, November, used to be ‘winter wonderlands,’ we’re seeing them with less and less snow. And some years, they’re not getting any snow,” said Taylor Fletcher, who grew up in Colorado, is based in Utah, and made his fourth Olympic team in Nordic combined.

Plenty of Winter Olympians share similar observations.

“I’m no meteorologist,” Italy’s Marta Bassino, last season’s World Cup giant slalom discipline winner, said with a chuckle, “but I see it with my eyes.”

Alexis Pinturault, a three-time Olympic medalist for France, recalls hitting the slopes at Tignes in his country’s Alps 20 years ago, but notes “it’s nearly impossible to ski there anymore.” U.S. aerials skier Winter Vinecki remembers an event in Belarus where, instead of a season-appropriate setting, she competed amid water puddles. Explains Taylor Gold, an American snowboarder who is part of Protect Our Winters, an athlete-driven environmental group: “The absolute ideal scenario would be to have a halfpipe made entirely of natural snow, but that’s just never possible anymore.”

[A study recently published](#) in “Current Issues in Tourism” projected that without a dramatic reduction of global emissions of greenhouse gases, only one of the previous 21 Winter Olympics sites would be able to reliably provide fair and safe conditions by the end of this century.

Researchers from Austria, Canada and the U.S. determined that even with emissions on the lower end of the scale, just three of 12 European cities that have hosted Winter Games would be a reliable site by the 2050s.

“Part of what we do papers like this for is to get the message out that we have a large influence ... and so, if we act, (there is) hope of avoiding those worst-case scenarios,” said Daniel Scott, a professor at the University of Waterloo who co-authored the study, “Climate change and the future of the Olympic Winter Games: athlete and coach perspectives.”

“People are going to have to hold their elected officials accountable,” Scott said, “because I pledge to lose weight every New Year’s Eve — and that doesn’t always pan out.”

The International Olympic Committee says it will contractually obligate future hosts to be climate positive. The Beijing Games are supposed to be climate neutral; all venues are expected to be powered by

renewable energy, and four ice rinks will use natural CO2 technology for cooling, replacing the hydrofluorocarbons that do more damage to the ozone.

[Wyoming rancher Tom Johnston](#) is overseeing the shaping of manufactured snow into Alpine courses in Beijing's mountains, which might be chilly but are missing real flakes. He has his own concerns about both of his pursuits: prepping ski slopes and, back home, producing alfalfa.

He deals with warmer-and-later-than-they-used-to-be winters in Colorado and Vermont that make staging World Cup races a challenge — and with drought conditions that affect his farm.

“There’s going to be problems,” said Johnston, who wonders whether the dates of future Games might need to shift. “But I think sports is the last worry about climate change, in my opinion, compared to food.”

There are efforts being made. Some on an individual level. Some on a grander scale.

[The National Ski Areas Association](#) — a trade group that represents more than 300 Alpine resorts in the U.S. — started a “Climate Challenge” a decade ago to push its 300-plus members to monitor and reduce their carbon footprint. In the 2020-21 season, 31 ski areas participated.

Airline travel required by the World Cup calendar weighs on [two-time Olympic champion Mikaela Shiffrin](#), especially when she thinks about stretches such as the one that carried female racers from Finland to Vermont to Canada to Switzerland across three weeks in November and December.

“I’m worried about my sport’s future but, really way beyond that, just worried about our all our futures and how much time we have before it all truly catches up with us,” said Shiffrin, who is from Colorado. “Sometimes I seriously consider just giving up races for the reason that it’s one less plane ride to take. That would be a small contribution to a huge issue.”

Shiffrin and American snowboarder Maddie Mastro, among others, say they have cut down on eating meat, because that industry harms the planet. Vinecki grows her own fruits, vegetables and herbs in an aeroponic garden at home. Ganong rides a bicycle instead of driving a car, when possible, as do his American teammate Ryan Cochran-Siegle and Vincent Kriechmayr, an Austrian who won two golds at the 2021 Alpine world championships. Keely Cashman, a first-time U.S. Olympian in Alpine skiing, limits how much new racing equipment she gets.

Some figure it’s too late.

“The reality is that ship has sailed, unfortunately, in my opinion. We haven’t made the requisite changes. We’ve kind of missed the window,” said Bode Miller, who won a U.S.-record six Olympic Alpine medals from 2002-14. “So we’re faced with what is, and that’s a changing climate. And over my lifetime, and certainly my kids’, we’re going to see some really dramatic stuff go down.”

Miller is an investor in, and public face of, Alpine-X, a group working to build indoor sites for snow sports around the U.S.

Some ski racers use indoor spots in Europe for training in technical events. Could actual World Cup events be next? Don’t forget: Figure skating and ice hockey used to be contested outdoors at the Olympics, so maybe it’s not entirely far-fetched to envision other sports moving inside.

Another alternative: Finding new race sites or going to higher spots in the mountains, where temperatures are colder and real snow could be likelier.

“Nothing wrong with skiing indoors in New Jersey, but that’s not exactly the same as staying at the top of the mountain at Deer Valley (in Utah) or staying at the top of the mountain in Austria,” said Ted Ligety, an American who won Olympic Alpine golds in 2006 and 2014. “There’s no replacing the outdoor beauty, the fresh air.”

HEADLINE	01/31 Off-duty officer fatally shot by deputies
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/off-duty-vancouver-officer-was-shot-by-deputies-pursuing-robbery-suspect-investigation-finds/
GIST	<p>An investigation into the fatal shooting of an off-duty Vancouver police officer determined that a Clark County sheriff's deputy shot Officer Donald Sahota within seconds of the deputy's arrival at Sahota's Battle Ground home on Saturday, The Columbian reported.</p> <p>The Lower Columbia Major Crimes Team released its initial findings in a statement late Sunday evening. A Clark County Sheriff's deputy fatally shot a person amid an armed robbery investigation Saturday, the sheriff's office reported, and the Vancouver Police Department separately said one of its off-duty police officers was killed at his home on the same day.</p> <p>Police responded to a report of an armed robbery Saturday night at a Chevron station, The Columbian reported. The robbery suspect, who deputies thought had a handgun, drove away in a stolen vehicle, the sheriff's office wrote in a news release.</p> <p>Twelve minutes later, police intercepted the car, which they determined to be stolen, on northbound Interstate 205, The Columbian reported. The driver of the car did not stop and eluded pursuing officers onto northbound I-5 before taking an exit toward Battle Ground, The Columbian reported.</p> <p>Officers assisting in the pursuit used spike strips to immobilize the car, and the driver jumped out and ran away, according to The Columbian.</p> <p>As officers worked to contain the fleeing suspect, a woman called 911 to report a man had pounded on her family's front door asking for help because he'd just been involved in a collision, The Columbian reported.</p> <p>The woman told the 911 dispatch that her husband, Sahota, 52, was an off-duty officer and that he had armed himself and gone into the driveway to detain the man for responding officers, according to The Columbian.</p> <p>The man started fighting with Sahota while his wife was still on the phone with 911, according to The Columbian. Sahota lost control of his firearm and was stabbed several times before the man broke free and began running toward Sahota's house.</p> <p>Sahota had regained control of his firearm and was running after the man, who was still armed with the item he used to stab Sahota and was trying to enter Sahota's home, when deputies arrived, The Columbian reported.</p> <p>"Within seconds of responding law enforcement officers arriving on scene, one Clark County Deputy Sheriff fired several rounds from a rifle striking the off-duty officer," police said, according to The Columbian. "The off-duty officer/homeowner collapsed on his front porch before responding officers were able to determine he was the homeowner and not the alleged robbery suspect."</p> <p>Officers attempted to provide emergency trauma care for Sahota, but they could not stabilize his condition, according to the statement. The suspect in the robbery and pursuit was taken into custody without further incident, the statement said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Climate change: not just heat, humidity too
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/measuring-climate-change-heat-humidity-82585400

GIST	<p>When it comes to measuring global warming, humidity, not just heat, matters in generating dangerous climate extremes, a new study finds.</p> <p>Researchers say temperature by itself isn't the best way to measure climate change's weird weather and downplays impacts in the tropics. But factoring in air moisture along with heat shows that climate change since 1980 is nearly twice as bad as previously calculated, according to their study in Monday's Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.</p> <p>The energy generated in extreme weather, such as storms, floods and rainfall is related to the amount of water in the air. So a team of scientists in the U.S. and China decided to use an obscure weather measurement called equivalent potential temperature — or theta-e — that reflects “the moisture energy of the atmosphere,” said study co-author V. “Ram” Ramanathan, a climate scientist at the University of California San Diego's Scripps Institution of Oceanography and Cornell University. It's expressed in degrees, like temperature.</p> <p>“There are two drivers of climate change: temperature and humidity,” Ramanathan said. “And so far we measured global warming just in terms of temperature.”</p> <p>But by adding the energy from humidity, “the extremes — heat waves, rainfall and other measures of extremes — correlate much better,” he said.</p> <p>That's because as the world warms, the air holds more moisture, nearly 4% for every degree Fahrenheit (7% for every degree Celsius). When that moisture condenses, it releases heat or energy, “that's why when it rains, now it pours,” Ramanathan said.</p> <p>In addition, water vapor is a potent heat-trapping gas in the atmosphere that increases climate change, he said.</p> <p>From 1980 to 2019, the world warmed about 1.42 degrees (0.79 degrees Celsius). But taking energy from humidity into account, the world has warmed and moistened 2.66 degrees (1.48 degrees Celsius), the study said. And in the tropics, the warming was as much as 7.2 degrees (4 degrees Celsius).</p> <p>When judging by temperature alone, it looks like warming is most pronounced in North America, mid-latitudes and especially the poles — and less so in the tropics, Ramanathan said.</p> <p>But that's not the case, he said, because the high humidity in the tropics juices up storm activity, from regular storms to tropical cyclones and monsoons.</p> <p>“This increase in latent energy is released in the air which leads to weather extremes: floods, storms and droughts,” Ramanathan said.</p> <p>University of Illinois climate scientist Donald Wuebbles, who wasn't part of the study, said it makes sense because water vapor is key in extreme rainfall. “Both heat and humidity are important,” Wuebbles said.</p> <p>Environmental scientist Katharine Mach of the University of Miami, who wasn't part of the study, said “humidity is key in shaping the impacts of heat on human health and well-being, at present and into the future.”</p>
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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	01/31 Serial arson suspect linked to 18 fires
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/serial-arson-suspect-now-linked-to-18-fires-in-tacoma-held-on-3m-bond

GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. — the woman who was arrested last week in connection with a series of arson fires that left a trail of damage in the city was being held in lieu of a \$3 million bond after making an initial court appearance Monday.</p> <p>Sarah Ramey, 42, of Tacoma, was being held on probable cause after investigators connected her to 18 fires that were deliberately set last week. She was taken into custody Friday.</p> <p>Authorities said they could decide to formally charge her with eight counts of first-degree arson. She was expected to return to court on Wednesday when prosecutors could announce their charging decision in the case.</p> <p>The Pierce County Superior Court judge said Ramey could be accused of several charges in addition to arson, including residential burglary, possession of stolen property and ID theft.</p> <p>No injuries were reported from the blazes, which began last Tuesday and included homes and other personal property.</p> <p>Officials have not publicly disclosed a motive for the arson fires, which included blazes last week that broke out in the 700 block of S. 56th Street when a shopping cart full of items was set ablaze along with two vehicle fires, one in the 500 block of S. 78th Street and the other in the 1000 block of S. Mildred Street that torched a carport.</p> <p>Prosecutors said investigators were still tallying clues and evidence from the crime scenes and planned to present them during the arraignment hearing later this week.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Thieves target another fire station
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/you-feel-violated-thieves-target-another-fire-station-steal-chainsaws-and-other-tools
GIST	<p>Another fire station has been hit by thieves. First in Oso and now in Acme.</p> <p>In both cases the thieves stole the exact same fire equipment. Whatcom County District 16's Chief is warning other fire houses Monday night.</p> <p>"This is the people's stuff and they took our stuff and it's like when someone comes into your house unwelcomed, you feel violated," said Hank Maleng, Fire Chief for Whatcom County Fire District 16.</p> <p>That violation hit deep early Saturday night when volunteer fire crews responding to an emergency call discovered their fire station broken into, every fire truck ransacked and life saving equipment gone.</p> <p>"They had everything open, every door on every piece of apparatus open," Maleng said. "This is where chain saws used to sit."</p> <p>In all the chief said three wildfire chainsaws, two rescue saws, a chop saw, two generators and a flood light were all swiped.</p> <p>If that wasn't enough - one of their most critical and vital tools --a battery-operated extrication tool often used to cut through vehicles to free people trapped inside was also gone. Maleng said the nice thing about the battery-operated equipment is that it's quicker to set up and use and quieter.</p> <p>"I'd like to get the word out to other rural type fire stations that might not have people around them all the time to beef up your security," Maleng said.</p>

\$25-thousand dollars worth of equipment gone - a big hit for tiny station 86 in Acme - part of Whatcom County Fire District 16. Fire station 86 is located southeast of Bellingham and covers the local valley, about 34 square miles and 2,300 residents.

Last year the fire district responded to about 240 calls and assisted in about 290 others.

Maleng knows their stolen equipment matches the equipment also stolen from the Oso fire department earlier this month. The same equipment and tools taken and nothing else.

"We know some of our neighboring districts have been robbed in last six months to 12 months," said Kassie Harkness, a volunteer EMT firefighter at station 86.

She was the one who first discovered the break-in - thieves jammed the door handle and got inside the fire house, possibly on Saturday or Friday night.

The Whatcom County Sheriff's Department said it could not comment on the case because it is an "active investigation."

"There has to be something more to it," Maleng said. "Is it a way to get into other fire stations or get into something else?"

He's adding more security including cameras at station 86, but said he can't lock the cabinets on his rigs because it would slow down their response time while on scene.

"We felt violated and betrayed what kind of person steals from a fire district just trying to help take someone pretty low," Harkness said.

Two years another one of the district other stations was hit by thieves, but that time they got away with only a few items and so far no arrests.

"You are not just stealing from me," Maleng said. "You are stealing from our community."

Maleng said Saturday late afternoon when they discovered the break-in is the same time crews were called to the scene of an 'MVA' a motor vehicle accident. He added fortunately they were able to manage without the missing equipment, but insists the theft slowed them down.

Crews scrambled to find backup gear, borrow equipment from other departments and requested law enforcement on scene.

Late Monday we learned the Lake McMurray Fire Department in Skagit County Fire District 15 had a break in too.

The department posted photos Monday afternoon of tools that were stolen from their fire station and the building damaged.

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HEADLINE	01/31 UCLA cancels classes over threats
SOURCE	https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-01-31/former-ucla-lecturer-mass-shooting-video-800-page-manifesto
GIST	<p>UCLA canceled in-person classes Tuesday after a former lecturer and postdoctoral fellow sent a video referencing a mass shooting and an 800-page manifesto with “specific threats” to members of the university’s philosophy department Monday.</p> <p>Several emails from department leaders, obtained by The Times, inform students and faculty that Matthew Harris made threats toward the philosophy department and people in it. In some of the emails, sent over</p>

the course of Monday evening, department heads recommend moving to virtual learning, and multiple instructors did so, alerting students that in-person classes would be canceled.

A campus alert sent shortly after midnight stated that authorities didn't have "specific information" Harris was in California.

"Nonetheless, out of an abundance of caution, all classes will be held remotely tomorrow, Feb 1," according to the alert. "We will keep you updated on developments."

Sherrilyn Roush, UCLA's philosophy department chair, had told faculty members to avoid holding in-person classes "until Harris' location is determined," [the Daily Bruin reported](#).

According to one email sent by a philosophy instructor to students, Harris' messages included "a video entitled 'UCLA Philosophy Mass Shooting' and an 800-page manifesto with specific threats towards some members of our department."

"In light of this, we will continue to have discussion through Zoom until the authorities say that it is safe," the email said. "I will keep you updated on this situation. But I would avoid being anywhere near Dodd Hall or the philosophy department until further notice."

Reports of Harris' video and manifesto quickly circulated on social media platforms such as Twitter and Reddit, where students and others expressed fear for their safety and criticized officials for not informing the campus as a whole.

In many posts, students said they were terrified and frustrated by what they described as a lack of clear communication by officials.

Steve Ritea, UCLA's chief media and executive communications officer, said university police are aware of "a concerning email and posting sent to some members of the UCLA community today and actively engaged with out-of-state law enforcement and federal agencies."

Ritea did not provide further information Monday night.

According to an email sent to members of the psychology department and obtained by The Times, UCLA police told a member of the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology that "at this time we're not concerned about anything happening."

Harris' YouTube channel contained more than 300 videos, the majority of which were uploaded Monday. By midnight, the channel displayed a message saying that the account had been terminated.

A video titled "UCLA PHILOSOPHY (MASS SHOOTING)" was posted Sunday and contained disturbing imagery, including footage of the 2017 mass shooting at a Las Vegas music festival and clips from the 2003 movie "Zero Day," which is loosely based on the Columbine High School mass shooting. The Times obtained a partial copy of Harris' email to the UCLA philosophy department.

Harris makes references to race and uses several profanities. He included links to his manifesto and videos, including the video that appeared to threaten a mass shooting.

"da war is comin," he wrote. "forward dis [expletive] to our tha goldhead caucasoid princess."

In reviews left on [bruinwalk.com](#), a site where students can post anonymous reviews of professors and other staff members, two students described Harris' disturbing and erratic behavior as a lecturer.

Harris "is extremely unprofessional and has sent his personal p*rnographic content to a student," according to one review.

	<p>In a separate post, another student described Harris' class as their least favorite at UCLA "ever" and said many students had complained to the department about his behavior.</p> <p>The student said Harris changed someone's grade 43 times after the end of the academic quarter and had changed their grade three times.</p> <p>A philosophy department newsletter from spring 2019 stated Harris would join the university as a postdoctoral fellow in philosophy after completing his dissertation at Duke University.</p> <p>"He works on philosophy of race, personal identity, and related issues in philosophy of mind," the newsletter stated.</p> <p>Harris was placed on leave last year while campus officials investigated reports that he sent a video with pornographic content to a student, according to the Daily Bruin. His term as a postdoctoral fellow was set to end in June.</p> <p>Earlier Monday, students staged a sit-in and demanded continued online learning options as the university reopens classrooms after beginning the winter quarter virtually because of a coronavirus surge driven by the Omicron variant.</p> <p>The sit-in was not related to Harris' alleged threats.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Tacoma road-rage shooting: man dies
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/man-hospitalized-with-life-threatening-injuries-after-tacoma-road-rage-shooting
GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. - A 56-year-old man has died following a road-rage shooting in Tacoma.</p> <p>Dispatchers received a call around 3:15 p.m. on Monday for reporters of a road rage incident involving a shooting at S 54th Street and S. Washington Street. When officers arrived, both cars left.</p> <p>The driver of the vehicle shot at called 911 to say that her back passenger had been shot. The back passenger was taken to a hospital, where he later died.</p> <p>The driver and her front passenger were uninjured.</p> <p>Detectives are investigating this as a homicide.</p> <p>They have not released suspect information.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Bellingham 'downtown ambassadors'
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3330346/seattle-tacoma-follow-bellingham-lead-downtown-ambassadors/
GIST	<p>Bellingham will soon start using unarmed "downtown ambassadors" as added security to help mitigate its shortage of police officers.</p> <p>Downtown ambassadors will be unarmed, fully vaccinated, and "trained in de-escalation techniques," according to a recent report from the Bellingham Herald. The idea is to have "a non-emergent response that can be quick and nimble and have eyes on the street," a senior planner with the city told the Herald.</p> <p>For KIRO Newsradio host Gee Scott, this is a program that represents a win-win for all involved, especially as local businesses in the Puget Sound region have been vocal about upticks in property crimes.</p> <p>"I love this idea," he said on Monday's Gee Scott & Ursula Reutin Show. "In order for us to really get on top of this mess that's going on right now — and when I say mess, I mean the increase in crime that is</p>

happening all over — it is going to take all hands on deck. It's going to take police, it's going to take community, it's going to take government and everything to really get on top of what's going on."

As Gee pointed out, it's little different from businesses that hire their own private security.

"When I go to the gym at LA Fitness over there in Puyallup, there is this security guard driving through the parking lot," he described. "I'm sure that security guard is unarmed, right? I'm sure that this security guard is not trained like a police officer. But here's one thing that I love about the security officer that is driving and patrolling around the parking lot: I guarantee you it discourages thieves from breaking in cars."

Host Ursula Reutin, though, expressed a measure of skepticism.

"Why would the city need to hire private security if they do have a police force?" she posited. "Wouldn't you rather they boost their police department numbers?"

"I'm not trying to deride mall cops, but I have a different feeling when I see someone in one of those segways going around the mall than I do if I see a commission officer," she added.

UPDATE, 11:54am:

The Downtown Seattle Association clarified in a statement to KIRO Newsradio's Gee & Ursula Show that the organization has its own ambassador program in Seattle, and has "recently entered into a contract" with a private security firm to help fill gaps in "troublesome" areas like Third Avenue between Pine and Union.

"We've actually been investing in either private security or SPD overtime patrols for quite some time," a DSA spokesperson noted.

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HEADLINE	01/31 Cartel war drives lime prices to skyrocket
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/xgdv9d/a-drug-cartel-war-is-making-lime-prices-skyrocket-in-mexico
GIST	<p>MEXICO CITY—Limes are part of Mexico's identity. Essential companions to tequila, tacos and guacamole, they're critical ingredients in the country's gastronomy.</p> <p>They are also a pawn in an escalating war among rival drug cartels that is driving lime prices to record levels.</p> <p>In part, limes are subject to the same global forces that are driving prices up all over the world. But they also face a criminal form of price-fixing imposed by cartels, who are turning to the lime business to help finance their violent operations.</p> <p>Lime prices have been steadily rising for years and frequently peak during winter months. The past year was unprecedented though. Lime prices jumped some 90 percent in December 2021 compared to December 2020. In Mexico City, a kilo of limes is selling for around 85 pesos (roughly \$4), \$1 more than the highest price a kilo has ever reached in the past. Lime prices are even higher in northern Mexico.</p> <p>A major supplier of winter limes in Mexico is the Pacific Coast state of Michoacán, the battleground for a bitter fight for control between the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, or CJNG, and a coalition of local groups known as the United Cartels. Growers in the state's multi-billion avocado and lime business are forced to co-exist with the cartels' drug trafficking and extortion operations.</p> <p>Organized crime uses lime production as a kind of war tax, limiting the harvest to manipulate the price and then demanding a percentage of the profits. Gangs have cut the number of days workers are allowed on farms to just twice a week, instead of the usual three days a week, said Hipólito Mora, a Michoacán lime producer.</p>

“It’s been two or three weeks since they don’t let us harvest more than two days a week,” he said. “Because of that, there is less production, and the price rises.”

Mora said the cartels collect the tax this way: Packing plants set the price they pay farmers for a kilo of limes. But they don’t pay that price. Instead, they are forced to divert a portion to organized crime groups, cutting profits for the farmers.

In some cases, the cartels themselves have invested in packing plants, said Romain Le Cour, program officer for Security and Violence Reduction at the think tank Mexico Evalúa.

The higher the lime price, the more money for cartels that operate in the area.

“It’s a great way to make quick money for all illegal armed groups, and right now the fight between them pushes them to look for more funding, more money,” Le Cour said. “The ability of criminal groups to regulate the economy is something that’s been really interesting in Michoacán for the past 10, 12 years.”

The trend echoes the story of avocado, known as the “green gold.” Nearly a million tons of avocado, [valued at around \\$2.4 billion](#), are exported to the U.S. annually, virtually all of it from Michoacán. That production has lifted thousands out of poverty but also fed the coffers of organized crime, which often charges a tax on every kilo sold.

The state grows [1.7 million tons of avocados and](#) around [800,000 tons of limes a year](#).

It’s impossible to quantify how much of the lime price spike is a result of organized crime and how much has to do with overall inflation, the seasonal volatility of produce prices, and a poor harvest.

But the reduced lime production is showing up in the government’s broader statistics. Mexico’s agriculture ministry reported that output from Michoacán fell some 26 percent in December compared to the month before. In a press release, the ministry’s agricultural information service attributed the high lime prices to poor weather, rising fuel and fertilizer costs, and violence in producing states, particularly Michoacán.

Ricardo Sheffield, head of Mexico’s federal consumer protection office, also attributed the sharp price increase to a [spike in violence](#) in Michoacán in November and December.

Warring groups “blocked and destroyed roads that were used for the production of lime,” he said in an interview. Lime prices have started to drop since the roads were [reopened last week](#) following the deployment of more than 1,000 soldiers from the Mexican Army and National Guard to the state, he said.

Organized crime groups in Michoacán have leveraged limes as a source of income as far back as 2011. The then-powerful Knights Templar cartel — whose members have since split between the CJNG and the United Cartels — began kidnapping and threatening people in the industry as a means of extorting them for a share of the profits. Business owners responded by forming self-defense groups. Mora was one of the first to organize one of these vigilante groups, although he said it’s since disbanded.

As lime prices steadily climbed over the last decade, growers reached a detente of sorts with criminal gangs — until the CJNG intensified its push [into Michoacán](#) last year.

The cartels’ presence has created an additional cost for the state industry, which produces some 27 percent of the country’s limes. The [spiraling violence](#) has pushed tens of thousands of people to flee, leaving fewer people to work the fields. By [some estimates](#), more than 5,000 hectares of lime orchards lie abandoned, and there is a shortage of workers to cultivate and harvest the fruit.

Falko Ernst, Mexico analyst for the International Crisis Group, said the lime business, like avocados, is in many ways a “shadow industry.”

“What drives and sustains their ability to make war hinges on their capacity to extract rent from the billion-dollar industries,” he said, while also warning not to overstate the impact of organized crime on prices when other factors like weather and broader inflation play a role.

In Michoacán, lots of producers and farm workers who pick limes are happy with the price hike — at least for now.

Farm workers are paid for every box of limes they pick, and the earnings on each box fluctuates with the fruit’s selling price. When the price is high, lime pickers can earn as much as \$60 in a day, Mora said. When the price is low, they earn as little as \$7.

“Of course, I don’t want the price to drop. Same as all the producers and the people who work in the fields,” he said. But, he added, it’s not worth it in the long term. “People can’t live off of two days a week of work.”

Le Cour said if history is an example, the honeymoon won’t last long. A decade ago, when the Knights Templar cartel started manipulating the lime market and forcing an increase in prices, they encountered little resistance at first.

“In a way, it was a win-win situation, until they started being targeted with extortion and violence,” Le Cour said of the growers. And like then, with violence on the rise now, he said, the remaining auto-defense groups are threatening to rise up once again.

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HEADLINE	01/31 Jewish rabbi targeted by anti-Semitic graffiti
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3330164/seattle-rabbi-target-anti-semitic-graffiti/
GIST	<p>Graffiti bearing an anti-Semitic message was spray-painted on a building near the Seattle office for a Jewish community organization over the weekend.</p> <p>The message reads: “It’s okay to be a Zionist genocider,” and was found Sunday on a building directly across from the Jewish Family Service (JFS) of Seattle in the city’s Capitol Hill neighborhood.</p> <p>JFS CEO Rabbi Will Berkovitz tells KIRO 7 TV that he believes he was the target of the message after publishing an opinion piece in the Seattle Times last week. In it, Berkovitz questioned whether criticism of the Israeli government “is rooted in a sincere desire to understand the conflict in its entirety or is just veiled antisemitism.”</p> <p>Berkovitz also issued a statement to the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH in response to graffiti, which quotes a passage from his opinion piece. It reads:</p> <p>As I wrote to one friend, Jews are a remnant of a remnant. The entire state of Israel is smaller than Lake Michigan. I cannot visit my family in Eastern Europe. The graves are not there any longer, let alone the people. It makes me wonder if the non-Jewish community understands how personal these attacks are for some of us. The fear is real. The violence is real. And the silence speaks volumes.</p> <p>With all the talk about intersectionality and diversity, I find myself asking if we Jews somehow do not count in those equations when it comes down to it.</p> <p>Berkovitz says he has filed a report with the police.</p> <p>The Jason Rantz Show obtained a statement from Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell:</p>

We will not tolerate anti-Semitism in Seattle – period. This disgusting act of vandalism is a sad reminder that hate can target our communities at any time and in any form. We must all speak out and reject this vile attack loudly and unambiguously.

I've directed Seattle Public Utilities to offer assistance in removing the graffiti immediately and Seattle Police Department to investigate its origin. We will not allow vandals to continue to disrespect Seattle's communities, deface our buildings and landmarks, and detract from the values that define our City. As such, I will be convening a call with Jewish leaders to reiterate Seattle's support for the Jewish community. We must lead every day with inclusivity – ensuring this is a welcoming place for all people, no matter their religion, creed, race, or background.

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HEADLINE	01/31 Nationwide lockdown of federal prisons
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/31/us/politics/ms13-texas-prison-fight.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The federal prison system was placed on a nationwide lockdown on Monday after a gang fight at a high-security penitentiary in Beaumont, Texas, left two inmates dead, the Bureau of Prisons said in a statement.</p> <p>While deadly fights break out with some regularity in federal penitentiaries, the bureau rarely locks down all 120 of its facilities in response.</p> <p>“In an abundance of caution, the Bureau of Prisons (B.O.P.) is securing our facilities as a temporary measure to ensure the good order of our institutions,” Kristie Breshears, a bureau spokeswoman, said in a statement. “We anticipate this security measure will be short-lived.”</p> <p>Ms. Breshears said the bureau would monitor events within its facilities and adjust its operations as the situation evolved, but declined to elaborate further for safety and security reasons.</p> <p>The lockdown was reported earlier by The Associated Press.</p> <p>Several inmates at the Beaumont prison started a violent altercation around 11:30 Monday morning, and four people were taken to a hospital for treatment, according to the Bureau of Prisons.</p> <p>Two of those inmates — Guillermo Riojas, 54, sentenced to 38 years in prison for carjacking and interfering with interstate commerce, and Andrew Pineda, 34, sentenced to six and a half years on racketeering charges — were pronounced dead by hospital staff members, the bureau said.</p> <p>No staff members or other inmates were injured in the altercation at Beaumont, a high-security prison that houses 1,372 male inmates. The Federal Bureau of Investigation was called in to investigate.</p> <p>Officials worried that the deadly fight, which included members of the violent Salvadoran street gang MS-13, would set off violence at other facilities, according to a person briefed on the bureau's decision, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss a continuing investigation.</p> <p>Officials began to lock down all federal prison facilities on Monday afternoon, meaning that inmates were generally confined to their cells.</p> <p>While the bureau's unusually severe response indicates that the fight was unique in its potential to create ripple effects, the violence was also in keeping with troubles that have long plagued the Bureau of Prisons.</p> <p>This year alone, the bureau has announced four inmate deaths and three escapes, as it continues to struggle with staff shortages, health issues stemming from Covid-19, violence, mismanagement and employee misconduct.</p> <p>This month, Michael Carvajal, who was appointed to run the Bureau of Prisons in February 2020, said he planned to resign. Mr. Carvajal agreed to stay on until a successor was in place.</p>

	The A.P. reported in November that more than 100 employees at the bureau had been arrested and convicted of or sentenced for crimes in the past three years, prompting Senator Richard J. Durbin, Democrat of Illinois and the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, to call for Mr. Carvajal's resignation.
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HEADLINE	01/31 Credible but no assault charges ex-NY gov.
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/31/nyregion/andrew-cuomo-charges.html
GIST	<p>ALBANY, N.Y. — The last of five criminal investigations into allegations of sexual misconduct against former Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo ended on Monday with the Oswego County district attorney joining his peers in concluding that there were insufficient legal grounds to bring criminal charges.</p> <p>The district attorney, Gregory S. Oakes, said in a statement that his decision was not a reflection on Virginia Limmiatis, the woman who had come forward, “or how harmful the acts she experienced were.” Mr. Oakes’s reasoning mirrored similar language used by prosecutors in Albany, Westchester and Nassau Counties, who opened inquiries into separate allegations but declined to prosecute even though they found the women accusing Mr. Cuomo to be credible. Prosecutors in Manhattan have also closed their investigation, according to a person briefed on the matter.</p> <p>Inquiries conducted by the state attorney general, Letitia James, and the State Assembly found that allegations of sexual harassment or misconduct made by multiple women were credible. Mr. Cuomo, a three-term Democrat, resigned a week after Ms. James’s report was released.</p> <p>Mr. Cuomo has consistently denied having touched anyone inappropriately.</p> <p>“As now five D.A.s have verified, none of the accusations in Tish James’s fraud of a report have stood up to any level of real scrutiny,” Richard Azzopardi, a spokesman for Mr. Cuomo, said in a statement. “As we’ve said since the beginning, the truth will come out.”</p> <p>Mariann Wang, a lawyer for Ms. Limmiatis, thanked Mr. Oakes for what she characterized as his careful consideration, adding: “The fact that this matter is not being criminally prosecuted does not mean Cuomo is innocent.”</p> <p>Ms. Limmiatis was working for National Grid when she encountered Mr. Cuomo at an event in 2017. She told investigators for the attorney general’s office that Mr. Cuomo had run his fingers across her chest as he read the name of her company off her shirt. Then, she said, he leaned in close to her cheek.</p> <p>“I’m going to say I see a spider on your shoulder,” he said, then brushed her chest, she told investigators, adding that the experience left her “profoundly humiliated and appalled.”</p> <p>Mr. Cuomo and his team have publicly pointed to photographs taken that day. Rita Glavin, a lawyer for Mr. Cuomo, said in a statement that the photos “indisputably showed that Governor Cuomo did not act improperly,” praising the outcome of the Oswego investigation as a triumph of truth over “mob mentality.”</p> <p>Mr. Cuomo and his team have denounced the attorney general’s report, calling it a political hit job intended to clear the way for Ms. James’s own bid for governor. (Ms. James declared her candidacy for the state’s top job last year, but withdrew after several months, saying that she had more to accomplish as attorney general.)</p> <p>In recent months, Mr. Cuomo’s team has sharpened its attacks on Ms. James, saying that she deliberately withheld evidence and ignored leads that might have vindicated him.</p> <p>The attorney general’s office pushed back on Monday, saying that Mr. Cuomo and his lawyer had “made up or misstated information to fit their own narrative of events.”</p>

“The findings of this independent investigation have been corroborated by a mountain of evidence, the Assembly’s report, and multiple district attorneys, including the Oswego D.A. today,” said Delaney Kempner, a spokeswoman for the attorney general’s office. She added: “Mr. Cuomo’s relentless attacks on these brave women will not mask the truth — he is a serial sexual harasser.”

The dismissal of criminal charges by the five county prosecutors, even as they affirmed the accusers’ credibility, left many advocates against sexual violence worried about the message that would be sent to victims about coming forward.

Mr. Oakes’s statement went a step beyond the other prosecutors, however, concluding with an unusual appeal to lawmakers.

“This investigation makes clear what victims, their advocates, police and prosecutors have said for years: The current sex offense statutes in New York fail to properly hold offenders accountable,” he said, adding: “Please address this issue.”

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HEADLINE	01/31 King Co. gun incidents in 2021 record high
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/gun-violence-in-king-county-in-2021-surpassed-2020s-record-numbers/
GIST	<p>Eighty-eight people were fatally shot and 372 were wounded by gunfire in King County last year, surpassing 2020’s record high of 69 firearm-related homicides and 268 shooting injuries that were largely attributed to the stressors of the pandemic.</p> <p>The King County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office on Monday released the 2021 year-end report for its Shots Fired Project, which counts fatal and injury shootings, shootings that result in property damage and those that don’t but can be confirmed through evidence such as shell casings. Law enforcement agencies across the county reported 1,405 shots-fired incidents in 2021, up from 1,025 in 2020 and 858 the year before.</p> <p>While gun violence has spiked in cities and even rural communities across the country, “it’s a uniquely American experience in response to the pandemic” that hasn’t been shared by other countries, Prosecutor Dan Satterberg said.</p> <p>The Shots Fired Project tracks data from 20 police agencies across King County, but a majority of the shootings are reported by eight of them that account for roughly 79% of the county’s population. They are the Seattle, Tukwila, Renton, Kent, Auburn, Federal Way and Des Moines police departments and the King County Sheriff’s Office, which provides policing services to unincorporated King County and 16 contract cities.</p> <p>The Shots Fired data does not include self-inflicted fatal shootings, self-inflicted gunshot injuries or shootings in which an officer was involved.</p> <p>According to the Shots Fired report, 62% of shooting incidents last year happened outside of the Seattle city limits, up slightly from the four-year average of 60% from 2017-20. All shootings were up 54%; shooting fatalities were up 54%; and the number of nonfatal shooting victims was up 82% compared with the four-year average. There were 19 more gun-related homicides and 104 more nonfatal shooting victims last year compared with 2020.</p> <p>Of the 460 gunshot victims, 85% were male, 28% were between the ages of 18 and 24, and 81% were people of color, the report says. As in previous years, 48% of victims of both fatal and nonfatal shootings were Black, and 27% of them were males between 18 and 24, the report says.</p> <p>By contrast. Black people make up about 7% of King County’s population.</p>

While the number of juvenile shooters and victims has declined slightly, the 2021 data does show the highest increase was in victims ages 30 to 39 and an increase in the number of female victims, and perpetrators, of gun violence, Satterberg said.

There is a subset of shootings related to the street-level drug trade but prosecutors are seeing more cases of gun violence spawned by road rage and reckless discharges, he said.

“When we started the Shots Fired project in 2016 and were asking the major police departments around the county to send us daily reports of anything involving guns, whether it’s a homicide or a wounding or a car or a street sign being shot up, I didn’t understand the entire value that might bring,” Satterberg said. “We became the central repository of this data because there was nobody else counting these cases and now it’s given us a baseline to really assess the health of King County. We would have no other way to see the extraordinary impact of the two pandemic years on gun violence but for the work of the Shots Fired team.”

King County Councilmember Girmay Zahilay said the pandemic has left people to increasingly struggle with depression, anxiety, anger and addiction at a time when hospitals and mental health and addiction-service providers are already operating above capacity.

“We’re living in times of turmoil, and the worst part about it in my view is that as we’re seeing societal problems stack up, the tools we have to solve those problems are being diminished at the same time. And that creates a really bad dynamic,” he said. “Government services in general are stretched super thin because of the compounding crises that we’re seeing. So that dynamic is what I’m seeing overall pushing violence up.”

Though incidents of gun violence have risen dramatically over the past two years, the number of cases police refer to prosecutors for a charging decision has dropped, said Satterberg, attributing the decline to police staffing issues.

Police and prosecutors only respond once someone has already been shot, but the data collected by the Shots Fired Project does help focus resources on reducing gun violence, Satterberg said. The project analyzes social networks since it’s well-known that victims, witnesses and perpetrators of gun violence are disproportionately at risk of becoming victims and perpetrators in the future.

Information obtained by police about individuals most at risk of gun violence is passed on to community groups like CHOOSE 180 and the YMCA, which have gun violence-prevention programs for youth and young adults.

Last summer, Seattle and King County launched a \$3.5 million pilot project — the Regional Peacekeepers Collective — and other gun prevention strategies designed to engage with young people considered most likely to become victims or perpetrators of gun violence. Young people are referred to the program by officials at Harborview Medical Center or the prosecutor’s office, and by outreach workers with community-based organizations like CHOOSE 180 and Community Passageways.

“I think this needs to be a sustained, multidecade effort,” Satterberg said of supporting community-based programs that can teach young people to walk away from fights and shrug off petty insults instead of escalating them with guns.

“You can’t predict all of it but you can predict some of it,” especially when it comes to retaliatory shootings, he said, and the data helps point to individuals, neighborhoods and even blocks where shootings are concentrated and then directs work with community members before a potential outbreak of gun violence occurs.

“These are extraordinarily disturbing numbers,” Satterberg said. “There’s nothing to celebrate here, but it does help inform smart strategies to reduce gun violence.”

HEADLINE	01/31 SPD: string of unrelated shootings Seattle
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/two-wounded-1-in-custody-after-string-of-unrelated-shootings-in-seattle/
GIST	<p>Six separate shootings over the weekend and into early Monday left two people wounded and one man in custody, according to Seattle police.</p> <p>The first incident was reported around 6 p.m. Saturday by a witness who told officers someone was shot at 12th Avenue South and South Jackson Street, according to a Seattle Police Department blotter post. Responding officers did not find a victim, but they found a shell casing and blood droplets.</p> <p>Around 11 p.m., police received a report about a man who was shot in both legs in the 400 block of Dexter Avenue North, according to the blotter post. The man was taken to Harborview Medical Center with what police described as non-life-threatening injuries. Officers recovered evidence of a shooting at an encampment nearby.</p> <p>Around 6:27 a.m. on Sunday, police received multiple reports of gunshots in the 4000 block of Rainier Avenue South, according to the post.</p> <p>Arriving officers found blood on the street and sidewalk, but they were unable to find any victims, police said. However, nearby buildings and a car were apparently damaged by gunfire, according to the post. Police found more than 30 shell casings in the area.</p> <p>Around noon on Sunday, police responded to a shooting at South Jackson Street and Maynard Avenue South. A suspect reportedly fired shots at a victim, who fled on foot, according to witnesses, police said. The victim was not found.</p> <p>Police spotted a shooting suspect a few blocks away and arrested him after a brief chase. The suspect, a 39-year-old man, threw a gun into a tent under the Interstate 5 overpass at South Dearborn Street, where it was recovered, according to police.</p> <p>The man was booked into King County Jail for investigation of first-degree assault, unlawful possession of narcotics with intent to sell, and unlawful possession of a firearm, according to the blotter.</p> <p>Around 1:30 p.m. on Sunday, police received a report of a shooting in an encampment in the 600 block of Northeast 55th Street, according to the blotter. Officers found a 31-year-old man with a gunshot wound to his leg.</p> <p>Seattle Fire Department medics treated the victim, who was then taken to Harborview, according to the post.</p> <p>On Monday morning around 1:18 a.m., a man reported he was the victim of a drive-by shooting as he was driving home from work, police said. The man told police that he was turning into the intersection of Delridge Way Southwest and Southwest Trenton Street, when the driver behind him fired several shots at his vehicle and then drove away, according to the post.</p> <p>News of the spate of shooting comes as the King County Prosecutor's Office on Monday announced more people were killed or wounded by gunfire in 2021 in the county than in previous years.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Two Proud Boys charged in Portland clash
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/2-from-right-wing-proud-boys-charged-in-2021-portland-clash/
GIST	PORTLAND — Two members of the far-right extremist group Proud Boys who participated in a rally in Portland last summer have been indicted in several acts of violence that day.

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HEADLINE	01/31 School threats have serious consequences
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/real-or-not-threats-of-violence-have-serious-consequences-in-seattle-schools/
GIST	<p>Right before winter break, schools in Seattle experienced an uptick in threats of violence that rattled the community, heightened student anxiety and resulted in criminal charges for a teenager.</p> <p>The string of threats in Seattle Public Schools could have been set off by a highly publicized Michigan school shooting that resulted in the deaths of four students; experts say there are often threat spikes in the aftermath of school shootings.</p> <p>But something else may also be at play. District officials say the increase in threats has been an issue since students returned to in-person school full time. The pandemic may be fueling some of the threats, they say.</p> <p>“We have a pandemic that we’re already kind of depleted from somewhat and now you layer back on what we’ve always struggled with these past 20 years with school shootings and violence on campuses,” said Erin Romanuk, a student-support-services manager at Seattle Schools.</p> <p>There were at least seven threats of violence directed at Seattle Schools in the first weeks of December. The threats forced lockdowns at some schools, caused classes to be canceled and prompted educators at two high schools to stage sickouts.</p> <p>School threats have become the “modern version of pulling the fire alarm,” said Jimmy Hung, chief of the juvenile division at the King County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office. The consequences for making a threat, even if it’s in jest, can be severe.</p> <p>Charges were filed this month against a 17-year-old student who threatened to carry out a school shooting at Franklin High School last month. The student is being charged with one count of felony harassment for “threatening to kill” and false reporting, according to court documents filed with the King County Superior Court.</p>

The threats at Seattle schools turned out to be hoaxes. But all threats, even if they are pranks, are taken “immensely seriously,” said Hung

The Franklin student called Seattle police to flag officers about a social media post, Hung said, and identified another student who allegedly made the threat. But that student denied making the threat. During the investigation, the student who made the initial report told police she made it all up and was playing a joke on a friend, he said.

“That landed poorly with me because it caused a great disturbance to the school and the community,” Hung said. “What irked me more than anything was false reporting and blaming another student.”

The student who was charged created a social media account, pretending to be another student, court documents show. The student threatened to kill students in multiple personal messages to other students on social media. The threats included racial slurs, homophobic slurs and profanities.

The hoax created a ripple effect. Classes were canceled at Franklin High for two days, once because of the threat and for a second day when educators called out sick en masse. Educators said they needed time to process the stress caused by the threat, and what they perceived as a lack of support from Seattle Schools.

In early January, Seattle students organized a [rally outside district](#) headquarters to demand stronger safety protocols and more mental health resources. The students also called for more time and space to process traumatic events.

Over the last seven or eight years, Hung said, he has reviewed hundreds of cases where students have made violent threats. In only a few cases did he believe a student “actually posed a serious threat.”

“This comment isn’t meant to minimize the seriousness of this,” Hung said. “But in these cases, I look at the intent of the kid and the impact on the community. The impact is always going to be great whenever a threat is made to schools. People are rightfully concerned, parents are alarmed, law enforcement is on hyper-alert and a lot of resources are put toward that.”

If prosecuted, Hung said, most are charged with felony harassment, which can result in up to 30 days in juvenile detention and six months of probation.

However, most minors don’t end up serving time in juvenile detention, Hung said, because that “creates a situation where our community would be less safe once that kid gets out.”

“Although we should be concerned, the appropriate concern isn’t always the max punishment, especially young people who are likely behaving in this way because they’re in a delicate and vulnerable state of mind,” Hung added. “I’ve been doing this long enough to know when locking human beings in a cage unnecessarily, they don’t usually come out better.”

School threats rising

Student arrests in connection to school threats have also occurred elsewhere in Washington and around the country. In December, educators and law enforcement were on alert after [rumors circulated of a TikTok trend](#) encouraging students to commit acts of violence at school.

The intensity and frequency of threats spiked between Thanksgiving break and the first few weeks of December, Romanuk said. And it fits into the pattern that the district has seen since the start of the school year.

The number of calls the district has received since September for student supports and assessments — including when students make violent threats — has gone up 56% since before COVID-19, she said.

When Romanuk first started working for Seattle Schools in 2011, her sole responsibility was to do “threat assessments,” which are triggered when a student says something concerning or violent in class or makes a

threat on social media. Assessing threats includes speaking with students, families and staff and putting together a care and safety plan for students.

After an assessment is made, a threat assessor follows up with students every week and continues to evaluate whether they pose a risk to students and staff, Romanuk said. Sometimes students are referred to mental health providers, counselors or mentoring programs.

The district assesses the intentions behind the threat, tries to determine if the student has access to weapons and finds out what kind of planning, if any, went into the threat, Romanuk said. Each situation is different and the district's role is to provide support for the student and family and look at what needs to change in schools so threats don't continue to happen.

"These are still young people who are learning and kind of expanding and testing some boundaries and in some cases really having some significant mental health needs," Romanuk said. The threat-assessment process is designed to help identify those needs, she said, and create a safe space for students at school.

There are always complex, underlying factors that lead students to make threats. It's important students realize threats are taken seriously and could have long-lasting consequences, Romanuk said, "which I don't think some think about because they're kids."

Most of the recent threats in Seattle were posted to social media, where it's easy to make anonymous serious threats with a few keystrokes.

During the pandemic, students have been interacting online more than in person, and "We all know everyone's filter is not what it should be [on social media] at least with kids," said Cassie Mulivrana, president of the Washington State Association of School Psychologists.

After learning from home for so long, students haven't had practice dealing with their frustrations and emotions in front of people, Mulivrana said. Sometimes young people don't realize there are consequences to saying violent things, even if they don't intend to act on them.

"Dealing with those real-time frustrations where you can't just turn off the computer and walk away from it and the person is right in front of you that's making you frustrated, those are definitely challenges for our kids and it's been there since prior to the incident in Michigan," Mulivrana said.

After being out of school for more than a year, [many students lost social and emotional skills](#). Educators are [having to work harder to make connections](#) and create a positive school climate.

"We already know that anxiety is at an all-time high for students right now and we're seeing it now more than ever," Mulivrana said. "When you add that insecurity of feeling unsafe in a school setting, that's only going to compound it and make it harder for students to feel comfortable and safe and learn at school."

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HEADLINE	01/31 FOP: rising crime not laughing matter
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/us/fraternal-order-police-accuses-white-house-press-secretary-of-laughing-off-rising-crime-rates
GIST	<p>The Fraternal Order of Police, America's largest police union, harshly criticized Jen Psaki on Monday after the White House press secretary mocked Fox News's coverage of rising crime rates and questioned the validity of discussing "soft-on-crime consequences."</p> <p>"I think it's wrong—very wrong—for Ms. Psaki to suggest that violent crime in our country is of no concern or to just laugh it off," President of the Fraternal Order of Police Patrick Yoes said in a statement on Monday.</p>

"She may feel safe in the [White House](#), one of the most protected buildings in the United States, but not everyone feels safe in their workplace," Yoes continued. "The world we find ourselves in is dangerous and is becoming increasingly more so. Tens of thousands of people have been the victims of crime this month alone and some of them never made it back home."

Psaki made the comments last week in an appearance on the podcast Pod Save America, criticizing Fox News for covering crime while other news outlets reported on other stories.

"And then on Fox is Jeanine Pirro talking about 'soft-on-crime consequences.' I mean, what does that even mean, right? So there's an alternate universe on some coverage. What's scary about it is a lot of people watch that," Psaki said.

Psaki went on to say that [Republicans](#) "voted against funding for local cops programs" by voting against the American Rescue Plan, a claim she repeated on Monday.

"In the American Rescue Plan, there was additional funding to support local cops programs, something that every single Republican voted against," Psaki said during a White House press conference Monday. "I said in that interview that I know they don't like it when we call that out. I'm going to keep calling that out because that's a fact."

The Washington Post Fact Checker [gave that claim](#) "three pinocchios" last summer, pointing out that the \$350 million in state and local aid allotted by the American Rescue Plan was earmarked for a "variety of budget-plugging purposes" and "lawmakers had no guarantee that police would get a slice of the pie."

Psaki also said Monday that Biden has increased funding for the COPS Hiring Program, which provides funds to law enforcement agencies to hire more officers.

The president has resisted calls from the progressive wing of his party to defund police departments. "We shouldn't be cutting funding for police departments," Biden said at the U.S. Conference of Mayors earlier this month. "I proposed increasing funding."

Crime did surge at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic and has continued going up during Biden's time in office.

[At least 16 cities](#) across the United States set records for murders in 2021.

A [Council on Criminal Justice study](#) this month found that across 22 major U.S. cities, murders rose 5%, gun assaults increased 8%, aggravated assaults increased 4%, and domestic violence incidents increased 4% last year.

Americans' concerns about crime have gone up with crime rates.

According to a [Fox Business poll](#) last month, 77% of registered voters said they are "extremely" or "very" concerned about higher crime rates, the second most pressing issue for Americans after inflation.

Yoes, the Fraternal Order of Police president, put some blame for rising crime rates on "agenda-driven prosecutors who have gone rogue."

"Many of them are refusing to bring charges against so-called 'low-level' or 'nonviolent' offenders," Yoes said. "Under their leadership, which has been abhorrent in many cases, many violent offenders don't stay in jail—they're back on the streets and free to commit more crimes."

San Francisco District Attorney Chesa Boudin ran on a platform of not prosecuting "quality of life crimes" and other lower-level offenses. He is now [facing a recall election](#) this summer as crime surged in San Francisco last year, including [a 16.7%](#) rise in homicides and a 22.7% rise in larceny thefts, according to police data.

In southern California, Los Angeles District Attorney George Gascon is also facing an upcoming recall election. There were [nearly 400 homicides](#) in the city in 2021, making it the deadliest year since 2007.

[New York City's](#) Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg issued a memo at the beginning of the year directing prosecutors to seek alternatives to incarceration except for "very serious cases." He [walked that memo back](#) after coming under criticism, saying that it gave "the wrong impression" about his plans.

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HEADLINE	01/31 Mexico media: 4th journalist killed in month
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/roberto-toledo-mexico-journalists-killed/
GIST	<p>An online news outlet in Mexico said Monday that one of its journalists was shot to death, the fourth journalist to be killed in the country in less than a month.</p> <p>Armando Linares, director of the local website Monitor Michoacán, said three assailants fatally shot Roberto Toledo in the city of Zitacuaro. Prosecutors in the western state of Michoacán said they were investigating the report.</p> <p>Linares said the website had received threats for reporting on governmental corruption.</p> <p>"For exposing corrupt administrations and corrupt officials and politicians, today that led to to death of one of our colleagues," he said.</p> <p>"The Monitor Michoacán team has suffered weeks, months of death threats. We know where all of this comes from," Linares added, though he did not identify those he thought responsible.</p> <p>Jan-Albert Hootsen, the Mexico representative for the Committee to Protect Journalists, said that Toledo worked as a camera operator and video editor for the Monitor Michoacán.</p> <p>"We are classifying him as a media worker or press worker," Hootsen said.</p> <p>Toledo was filming a new video column by Monitor Michoacán's deputy director, local lawyer Joel Vera, at Vera's office when the gunmen arrived, the outlet said.</p> <p>Jesús Ramírez, spokesman for President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, said via Twitter that the administration condemned Toledo's killing.</p> <p>"We will work together with the state and municipal governments to clear up the case," Ramírez wrote. "We will not allow impunity. We defend freedom of expression and the right to information."</p> <p>The National Academy of Radio and Television Journalists said in a statement that Toledo and other members of the Monitor Michoacán staff had denounced aggression and death threats connected to their work.</p> <p>Toledo was enrolled in the federal government's protection system for journalists and human rights defenders known as "el mecanismo," or mechanism, the academy said. It did not say what sort of protection Toledo had received. It can range from carrying a panic button to alert authorities in case of emergency to surveillance cameras installed around a home or even bodyguards.</p> <p>The unprecedented spate of killings has put reporters on edge across Mexico, and sparked protests earlier this month. The government says over 50 journalists have been slain in Mexico since December 2018.</p> <p>In the border city of Tijuana, two journalists were killed in a week. On January 17, crime photographer Margarito Martínez was gunned down outside his home, and on January 23, reporter Lourdes Maldonado López was found shot to death inside her car.</p>

	<p>Reporter José Luis Gamboa was killed in the Gulf coast state of Veracruz in an attack on January 10.</p> <p>Interior Undersecretary Alejandro Encinas said recently that more than 90% of murders of journalists and rights defenders remain unsolved, despite a government system meant to protect them.</p> <p>The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists puts the percentage at 95%, said Hootsen.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Calif. firefighter shot, killed battling blaze
SOURCE	https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-01-31/stockton-firefighter-shot-while-putting-out-blaze
GIST	<p>A 21-year veteran of the Stockton Fire Department was shot and killed Monday morning while putting out a dumpster fire, and authorities said a suspect had been taken into custody.</p> <p>Capt. Vidal “Max” Fortuna, 47, was shot while responding with other firefighters to a blaze about 5 a.m., police said.</p> <p>Robert Somerville, 67, was arrested in connection with the shooting, police said Monday night. He was booked into San Joaquin County Jail on homicide and weapons charges.</p> <p>Officers recovered a .380-caliber handgun at the scene, police said.</p> <p>“This is my worst nightmare as a fire chief,” Fire Chief Rick Edwards said at a news briefing. “I ask you to keep Capt. Fortuna’s family and the Stockton Fire Department family in your thoughts and prayers in this difficult time.”</p> <p>Stockton Professional Firefighters union President Mario Gardea said both retired and active firefighters met at the department’s Central Fire Station to honor Fortuna.</p> <p>“Max was a firefighter who showed up every day and never complained about being on the job,” Gardea said. “I don’t know too many other firefighters that enjoyed the job as much as him.”</p> <p>Firefighters were putting out a blaze in a commercial area when Fortuna was shot, authorities said. His fellow firefighters began emergency medical service and transported him to a hospital, where he died, Edwards said.</p> <p>“The Stockton Fire Department is a brotherhood, it’s a sisterhood,” Mayor Kevin Lincoln said during the news briefing. “As a city, we will do everything that we can under our will and our power to support this family and to support our Fire Department.”</p> <p>“Once again, firefighters are part of our public safety family, and this hits all of us hard,” said Officer Joe Silva of the Stockton Police Department. “This just shows the dangers of our job. Right now, our thoughts and prayers are going out to the firefighter’s family and all of our firefighters here in the city of Stockton.”</p> <p>Police said there did not appear to be other suspects in the shooting, although the investigation is ongoing. A motive was not immediately clear.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/31 Bomb threats: historically Black colleges
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/hbcus-received-bomb-threats-monday/story?id=82577940
GIST	<p>For the second time this month, at least six historically black universities and colleges have received bomb threats.</p> <p>Howard University, Bowie State University, Bethune-Cookman University, Southern University, Delaware State University and Albany State University have all reported potential threats Monday.</p>

The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation is aware of the series of bomb threats and is working with law enforcement to address potential threats.

"As always, we would like to remind members of the public that if they observe anything suspicious to report it to law enforcement immediately," the FBI said in a statement to ABC News.

The acting deputy director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms & Explosives, Thomas Chittum, also said that agents from the bureau are responding to the reports.

"We can confirm that ATF has responded," Chittum told reporters on a call Monday. "Of course, it is a federal crime to use interstate facilities to make a bomb threat, and so ATF will provide our investigative expertise and support to that investigation, but obviously, the facts are preliminary and unfolding."

Albany State University in Georgia received notice of a bomb threat to the academic buildings of its campus. As local law enforcement officials investigate, all ASU campuses remained closed and employees and students were told not to report to campus.

Bowie State University in Maryland is also investigating a bomb threat with bomb technicians from the Maryland State Fire Marshal. The campus remains closed as K9s conduct sweeps of university buildings.

"OSFM Bomb Technicians and explosive detection K9s are assisting @BowieState PD with a telephonic bomb threat," a tweet from the agency read. "Maryland State Police are on the scene. The investigation is active. Prince George's County Police Department is also on the scene."

Southern University and A&M College also received a bomb threat Monday and went into lockdown. The university told students classes were canceled and that they should remain in their dorm rooms until an all-clear was issued.

Delaware State University told ABC News that University Police are investigating and that employees and commuter students have been instructed not to report to the campus until further notice. Residential students have also been asked to remain in their dorm rooms.

Howard University and Bethune-Cookman University also report potential bomb threats to their campuses, according to ABC-affiliate ABC7 News.

Judson Bible College, which is not an HBCU, was also targeted.

On Jan. 4, at least seven historically Black colleges and universities received bomb threats, according to school officials.

However, no bombs were found on the campuses of Florida Memorial University, North Carolina Central University, Prairie View A&M University, The University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, Florida Memorial University, Norfolk State University and Xavier University of Louisiana.

The threats forced campuses to lockdown or evacuate and local law enforcement was alerted.

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HEADLINE	01/31 Judge rejects plea deal Arbery murder case
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/ahmaud-arberys-family-slams-federal-prosecutors-deal-men/story?id=82577871
GIST	<p>A U.S. District Court judge rejected on Monday a plea deal that would have allowed the white Georgia man and his father convicted in the murder of Ahmaud Arbery to serve a large part of their sentences in federal prison.</p> <p>Judge Lisa Godbey Wood's decision to turn down Travis McMichael and Gregory McMichael's plea agreements with federal prosecutors came after Arbery's parents and two aunts gave emotional statements asking the judge to reject the deal and proceed with a federal trial next week.</p>

"All they would have to do is stand up and say that they were motivated by hate and then this court will concede to their preferred conditions of confinement," Arbery's mother, Wanda Cooper-Jones, told the judge. "I do not need to hear them say they were motivated by hate. That does me no good. It does my family no good."

She added, "It is not fair to take away this victory that I prayed and I fought for. It is not right. It is not just. It is wrong. Please listen to me. Granting these men their preferred conditions of confinement would defeat me. It gives them one last chance to spit in my face after murdering my son."

Following Travis McMichael's hearing on Monday, a second hearing was scheduled on the plea deal the government's attorneys negotiated with 66-year-old Gregory McMichael. However, Godbey Wood said her decision would be the same in the case of the elder McMichael, whose attorney agreed to cancel the hearing.

Both men and their neighbor, 52-year-old William "Roddie" Bryan, were convicted on state murder charges in Arbery's 2020 death. They were sentenced to life in prison. Travis and Gregory McMichael were sentenced without the possibility of parole.

A federal prosecutor told the judge during Monday's hearing that the agreements called for the men to immediately be turned over to the federal Bureau of Prisons to serve 30 years in a federal penitentiary before being returned to the Georgia Department of Corrections to serve the remainder of their sentence.

Godbey Wood gave both men the option to go forward with their guilty pleas and risk her giving them a harsher sentence than what they agreed to, or to withdraw their pleas and go to trial starting on Monday.

The judge gave them until Friday to decide.

Prior to the judge's decision, federal prosecutor Tara Lyons touted the plea deal as one that "powerfully advances the larger interest of justice."

"Through this resolution, the defendants will accept responsibility for the full nature of their crime, admitting publicly in front of the nation that this offense was racially motivated," Lyons said.

Federal prosecutors filed notices of plea agreements for Travis McMichael, 35, and Gregory McMichael, on Sunday in U.S. District Court in Brunswick, Georgia, and requested Monday's hearing for Godbey Wood to review the deal.

No plea agreement was announced for Bryan.

In announcing her decision, Godbey Wood said the plea agreements would lock her into a sentence of 30 years or 360 months.

"Here in this relatively early stage in the case, I can't say that 360 months is the precise, fair sentence in this case," Gobey Wood said. "It could be more, it could be less, it could be that. But given the unique circumstances of this case and my desire to hear from all concerned regarding sentencing before I pronounce sentence, I am not comfortable accepting the terms of the plea agreement."

Prior to Monday's hearing, Arbery's relatives slammed the plea deal, alleging it was done behind their backs. But Lyons said her office was in frequent communication with attorneys for Arbery's family and that they assured prosecutors the family would not oppose the plea arrangements.

"We respect the court's decision to not accept the sentencing terms of the proposed plea and to continue the hearing until Friday," Assistant U.S. Attorney General Kristen Clarke said in a statement. "The Justice Department takes seriously its obligation to confer with the Arbery family and their lawyers both pursuant to the Crime Victim Rights Act and out of respect for the victim."

Clarke added, "Before signing the proposed agreement reflecting the defendants' confessions to federal hate crimes charges, the Civil Rights Division consulted with the victims' attorneys. The Justice Department entered the plea agreement only after the victims' attorneys informed me that the family was not opposed to it."

Arbery was out for a jog on Feb. 23, 2020, in the Satilla shores neighborhood near Brunswick, Georgia, when the McMichaels assumed he was a burglar, armed themselves and chased him in their pickup truck. Bryan joined the five-minute pursuit, blocking Arbery's path with his truck and recorded video on cellphone of Travis McMichael fatally shooting Arbery with a shotgun during a struggle.

Arbery's parents, Cooper-Jones and Marcus Arbery, asked the federal court to be allowed to assert their right under federal law to oppose the plea deal directly before the court.

"The DOJ has gone behind my back to offer the men who murdered my son a deal to make their time in prison easier for them to serve," Cooper-Jones said in a statement before Monday's hearing. "I have made it clear at every possible moment that I do not agree to offer these men a plea deal of any kind. I have been completely betrayed by the DOJ lawyers."

When Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis police officer convicted on state charges of murdering George Floyd, reached a plea agreement on federal charges that he violated Floyd's civil rights, he asked to be sent to federal prison even though he is expected to serve more time than the 22 years he was sentenced to in state court.

In response to Chauvin's plea deal, legal experts told ABC News that federal penitentiaries run by the Bureau of Prisons tend to be better than state prisons. The experts said federal prisons have fewer overcrowding issues, more comfortable bunks and even better food and educational resources than often cash-strapped state prisons. High-profile inmates, especially former law enforcement officers like Chauvin and Gregory McMichael, tend to also get greater protection in federal prison, the experts said.

The federal Bureau of Prisons estimated that the annual cost of housing an inmate in a federal facility in 2020 was a little over \$39,000.

The annual cost of housing an inmate in a Georgia state prison is roughly \$20,000, according to a 2015 study by the Vera Institute of Justice, a nonprofit research and policy organization.

"Federal prison is going to be a lighter sentence for these men," Lee Merritt, an attorney for Cooper-Jones said during a news conference prior to the Monday's hearing.

Merritt also cited an ongoing investigation by the Department of Justice into conditions at Georgia state prisons that was launched in September.

The DOJ said in a statement that the investigation is primarily focused on whether Georgia provides inmates reasonable protection from physical harm at the hands of other prisoners and staff.

Cooper-Jones said at Monday's news conference that she found the plea deal "disrespectful."

She said she learned of the deal on Sunday and has had discussions with DOJ attorneys since.

"I told them very, very adamantly I wanted them to go to state prison and do their time," Cooper-Jones said.

In a separate news conference, Marcus Arbery said that finding out about the deal made him "mad as hell."

He said his son's death was a racially-motivated murder and "we want 100% justice, not half justice."

	He added, "I don't want no chance of trying to make their lives easy."
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